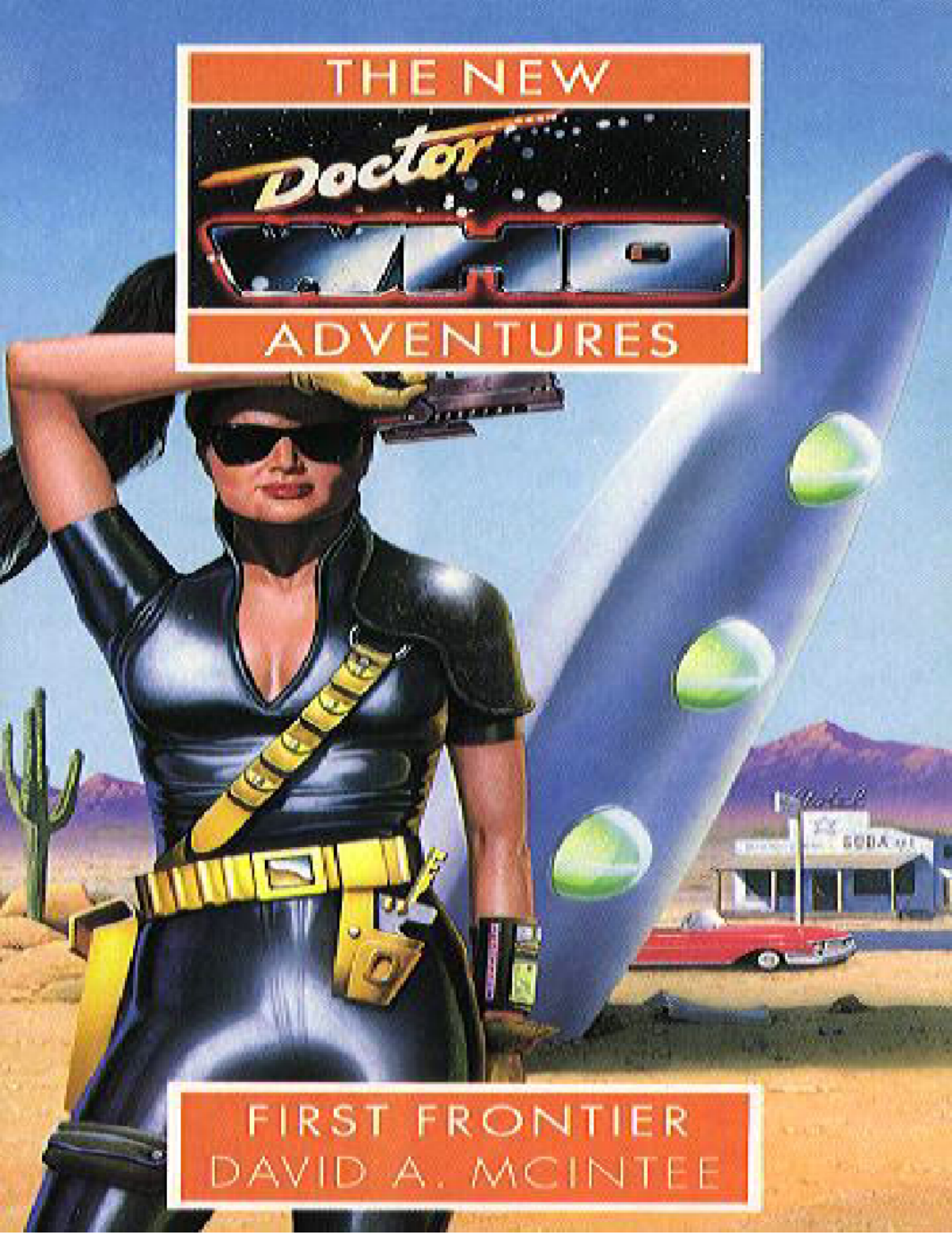
THE NEW
Doctor
WHO
ADVENTURES
FIRST FRONTIER
DAVID A. MCINTEE

Ace raised her blaster.

'You've already killed me once, girl,' Kreer said. 'Didn't you learn anything from that?'

When Bernice asks to see the dawn of the space age, the Doctor takes the TARDIS to the United States of America in 1957 - and into the midst of distrust and paranoia. The Cold War is raging, bringing the whole world to the brink of atomic destruction.

But the threat facing America is far more deadly than Communist Russia.

The militaristic Tzun Confederacy have made Earth their next target for conquest - and the aliens are already among us.

Two nuclear warheads have been stolen; there are traitors to the human species in the highest ranks of the army; and alien infiltrators have assumed human form. Only one person seems to know what's going on: the army's mysterious scientific adviser, the enigmatic Major Kreer.

David A. McIntee is the author of **White Darkness**. He lives near Stirling with a dog who thinks she's a cat, and a cat who thinks she's a dog.

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Author's Notes

Yes, I'm sorry, but I'm at it again. Before I get on with acknowledgments for this book, I'd like to add another for *White Darkness* - namely thanks to Phil Bevan for his illustrations to the Prelude in *DWM* 201. This was all done long after the book was finished, hence I obviously couldn't mention him then.

This time, thanks are due to Peter and Rebecca, obviously for commissioning this book and being so helpful during the writing

process

(free drinks at the Conservatory in particular); Gary Clubb for the odd one—

Cover illustration by Tony Masero

liner; and Gary Russell, but I can't say why without spoiling the major plot

twist. And, last but not least, Tony Masero for the splendid cover.

ISBN 0 426 20421 2

This has been another research-heavy book, and I wouldn't want to

leave you without a few pointers as to the non-fiction sources. The organizations referred to all did or do exist, though the IPU was disbanded in 1947 - that's dramatic license. All the locations also really

Transcribed for the internet by Kara Jade

exist, with the exception, for reasons which will become obvious, of Corman AFB, though it is a combination of different elements attributed to

Neither intentional nor unintentional claim of ownership is levied against

different bases in UFO myth. The main sources of research for this facet,

this work, and no profit has been made by its transcription or distribution.

and the occasional UFO report which has been fictionalized here, were:

We respect the original copyright holders, and encourage readers to

Aliens From Space by Donald Keyhoe; *Above Top Secret* by Timothy purchase original copies from bookstores when available.

Good; the reports of Robert Lazar which appeared in *Alien Liason*, edited

by Timothy Good; *Farewell Good Brothers*, an Oscar-winning short documentary about 1950s contactees; and finally Finnish TV's *UFOs*, which was shown on BBC2 over Christmas 1993.

The characters are fictional, except for Shadow.

Finally, I've been warned to mention my mum and dad, who

complained when I didn't do so last time.

If you're wondering what to expect here, well: last time I did a doom-laden historical, next time - chance'd be a fine thing - I plan a doom-laden

historical, so for now let's just have some fun, eh?

Cue the white circle.

I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to

be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to original evil.

Heat scalded every cell. The searing molten fire of liquid rock The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde

overwhelmed every sensation, a red-tinged whiteness the only vision possible.

Shuddering tremors racked the body, painfully threatening to shake the very cells apart, molecule by molecule.

The only thought that existed in the blinded mind was to be free of the fire, free of the pain, and free of the searing brightness.

Two minds flowed, fusing briefly of necessity, sensing an opening, an opportunity between what was and what could be. Mutual strengths interlocked, seeking remembered calmness.

If time still existed at all, there could be little of it left, but the speed of thought was fast enough to take advantage. The minds' eyes, operating as one, saw past and present, and focused, blotting out the liquid fire.

Deep within the heart of linked minds something burst free, flashing outwards in the blink of an eye. The heat flared beyond the limits of imagination, searing the mind with a flash. The senses revelled in their freedom, far from their erstwhile prison.

And then there was merciful blackness.

FIRST FRONTIER

May Day, 1957

Occulting the diamond-scattered sea of stars beyond, the dark night-side of the planet wheeled slowly amidst the sluggish backwaters of the galaxy. Through the cloud-cover, tiny pin-points of light were barely perceptible from low orbit, marking the locations of several cities on the surface far below.

Although its origin was too tiny to be seen by the naked eye, one small spark abruptly swelled into a blazing torch as it tore its way out into a trailing pillar of flame, a cylinder of gleaming steel, already scorched in places by its own exhaust, broke free of the restrictive blanket of gases around the planet. The flame flickered and died as the rocket coasted out into the vacuum, sharp moonlight picking out the scarlet 'CCCP' that was the only matt area on the polished surface.

At a preprogrammed altitude, explosive bolts fired around the nose-cone, splintering it to allow a smooth metal sphere with four trailing antennae to float gently out of its metal womb and into its own orbit.

In a cavernous bunker deep within the northerly Nykortny Cosmodrome, warning lights flickered crazily along the serried ranks of battleship-grey consoles and telemetry stations. Dozens of technicians in the olive drab shirts of the *Raketnye Voiska Strategicheskogo Naznacheniya* branch of the army struggled to douse the warning lights and restore control.

Heavy doors at one end of the room burst open and a group of uniformed men bedecked with medals strode in. One of them, with a granite face, briefly glanced at the world map dominating the far wall

of

the room, on which a skewed orbital track was being projected. 'What has

gone wrong?' he demanded gruffly.

A nervous scientist in his shirt-sleeves looked up from studying a console. 'The satellite has gone out of control. It has deviated from its

projected path and will not respond to our instructions - not even the abort

signal. Also,' he went on reluctantly, 'it appears to be transmitting some

kind of signal which we cannot understand.'

'Meaning?' the officer prompted.

'It registers on our receivers but is not a radio signal. In fact it doesn't

appear to follow any sort of logical binary sequence. Here, I'll let you hear

it,' the scientist finished, leaning across to twist a dial on one panel.

Immediately the room was filled with a strange and atonal electronic warbling.

steel shutters slammed down around the doors. His face a mask of

'Western?' the officer queried in a low voice.

agony, he clutched at his leg as Ace scuttled behind a computer bank,

'Unlikely. The transmission is directed away from Earth and, as you searching for the gunman. 'Professor!' she called.

can tell from the orbit plot, the satellite is also spinning away from the

Her anguished cry brought only a muffled groan in response, and

planet.'

another burst of gunfire from the beige-uniformed guards who were barely

The granite-faced man nodded, looking around at the staff with a in view at the ends of the catwalk.

calculating air. 'This operation is at an end,' he declared finally. 'The There were at least three guards, and Ace could hear more

Praesidium will consider what action to take. Meanwhile, make sure that approaching. Tugging another can from a bulging pocket, she triggered it no word of these events leak out. When we next launch a satellite, it will and hurled it upward towards the guards' position. The explosion bloomed be designated Sputnik One, not Two. This failure must be erased from the like a rose and pitched the bloodied guards to the floor below.

records.'

Another couple of guards appeared through a ground-level doorway as

it opened again, and poured a stream of fire into the Doctor as he tried to

A seepage of amber desert twilight speared across concrete, staining it rise. His body jerked spasmodically and collapsed once again. With a darkly with bloodied shadows. Blackness flickered as a girl, perhaps in howl, Ace threw herself towards one of the guns that had fallen with the her late teens or early twenties, slipped through the narrow doorway that guards from the catwalk. It was a Thompson sub-machine-gun, but the admitted the light. Her badge-encrusted bomber jacket rustled faintly as method of operation was simple enough. She unleashed a volley of fire she looked around in the dim light, a small silver can in one hand and a into the guards, who were knocked to the floor under the impacts.

metallic baseball bat in the other. 'No ground station and no guards, Ace took a deep shuddering breath, too stunned to attempt anything

Professor,' she whispered in a fain west-London accent.

else. Nevertheless, it was only an instant before she took her first step

'There'll be some somewhere, and I wish you'd remember to call me towards the Doctor's body and its satellite blood pools.

Doctor,' her companion replied exasperatedly. He was a small man in

That first step was as far as she got. A harsh drumming so strong as to

checked trousers and a chocolate-brown jacket. Barely sparing a glance be beyond pain pounded into her back, shattering ribs as she pitched for the empty hallway they were passing through, he stalked over to the face-first to the floor, and all sensation faded.

far wall, running an extendable electronic probe over the prefabricated

sections. 'I thought as much,' he announced with a satisfied nod. 'There's Boots crunched shards of metal and concrete as the guards circled the some sort of hidden chamber here. Blow me a nice hole in this wall, Ace.'

room, ignoring the metallic scents of blood and acrid cordite fumes that

'Right.' The girl grinned eagerly, twisting the cap of the can she held, clouded the area. With a snap, a powerful spotlight came on in an alcove, and laying it at the foot of the wall. 'Down!' she called, hurling herself to illuminating a tall blue British Police Box with frosted windows and a light the floor. The man who had reminded her

that he was the Doctor did on top.

likewise, an instant before a hollow boom heralded the blast that left a

'Well?' a rich voice asked, coming from a figure standing expectantly in

smoking hole in the grey wall. Lights flickered distantly on the other side the shadows of the nearest catwalk doorway. A ghostly reflection tinted of the breach.

his almost invisible eyes as he looked down at the bloodstained scene.

Beyond the shattered edges of the wall was a sloping corridor that led

In answer, one of the guards walked over the bodies. He knelt by Ace,

down to a room filled with machinery and electronics. Lights flashed feeling for a pulse at her neckline below the blonde roots of her otherwise brightly over the ebon surfaces of tall cabinets ranged around the walls, dark hair. Pulling her aside, he listened at the left side of the Doctor's while thick pipes and cables rose in a column in the centre of the room chest. He looked back up at the figure in the shadows and drew a hand and spread out along the walls at the same level as a catwalk, some across his throat in a curt gesture.

twenty feet up. Two doorways stood open on either side, with another two

A faint chuckle drifted from the corner as the man consulted his gold

above, giving access to or from the catwalk. The Doctor stepped smartly watch. 'Precisely twenty-eight seconds. That's excellent. Have this room up to the column of pipes and cables as Ace turned on her heels, sniffing cleared for installation of Shok'Arl's telemetry equipment when it arrives.'

at the air and looking around suspiciously.

He turned away towards an inner door, then paused for a moment, a

'Aha, Ace,' the Doctor commented, 'there's a console here that seems glimmer of light outlining his sardonic smile. His arm shot out, pointing at to be the main-' A harsh rattle cut off his words, and his left leg was the blue box. 'Now destroy that object,' he hissed as he vanished back smashed out from under him, spots of blood spraying across the floor as into the shadows.

doubted it; nothing ever happened in Alamagordo these days. It was a

situation which left him wondering whether he should be

disappointed by

the boredom or relieved that people were, by and large, behaving themselves.

The sheriff's office was set slightly back from the road, a few light trees

October 4th, 1957

screening the redbrick construction that was so different from the adobe

style of most of the other local buildings. Brady skipped up the steps with

a lightness that belied his size and build, pushing through in to the air—

When the shop door opened, a wave of cooled air rolled lazily out of the conditioned front area.

store, leaving a roomful of dry heat ahead of the customer who was The fan-cooled room was devoid of either complainants or suspects,

entering. At the sound of the door, a balding man who wasn't quite gone so Brady simply nodded to the long-faced Muldoon, who had a to fat yet looked up from the boxes of nails he was counting. His gaze met newspaper spread across the front desk beside a mug of black coffee.

a stocky man, deeply lined and going grey, wearing faded denims and 'Any business?' Brady asked.

workshirt. 'Oh, it's you, Joe,' the storekeeper acknowledged. 'Looking for

Muldoon looked up from the paper, the upward tilt of his eyes giving an

anything in particular today?'

even more hangdog look than usual. 'Nothing much. The Johnsons

'The stuff from Exeter's, if it's in yet, Larry.' Though Joe's smile was reckon a coyote's hiding out in their shelter, and that's it.'

easy and time-worn, the faint guttural accent always seemed to the Brady grimaced. 'Coyote, shit. Ten'll get you twenty it's the dog the

storekeeper to hold a faint edge of implied threat. He shrugged the widow Brown reporting missing on Monday.'

thought away and bent to look in the storage area under the far end of the

'I'll pass on that bet. What was the problem this morning?'

counter. 'Plenty of stuff got delivered today,' Larry called as he

shuffled

'The usual,' Brady sighed, recalling this most recent of a series of visits

the boxed and cartons around, 'but I'm not sure if-' He broke off, to a local farm. 'Just the Hunt kid seeing shadows on the sandpit again.

examining a box and its attached delivery note. 'No, here it is. Capacitors, Okay,' he muttered wearily, 'I guess I'll go see about the so-called coyote.'

valves... Hell, I don't know half of this stuff - but it's your order all right.' He He paused before turning to the door. 'Anything in the paper?'

slid the box across the counter as Joe took out his wallet and began

'Another cupcake says he had a ride in a flying saucer.'

peeling banknotes from it.

Brady simply grunted as he made for the door. 'No such thing,' he

'That'll be thirty-two fifty,' Larry announced.

rumbled. 'They're either Russkies or our boys, and there's no such thing

'Here you go,' Joe smiled, handing over the money and lifting his as people from outer space.' Sparing only the briefest of final glances for package.

the two-tone photograph of the contactee in question, he left, leaving

'So,' Larry shrugged, 'what are you doing with all this stuff anyway? Muldoon to contemplate the wide-eyed and thin-faced features that stared Building a rocket ship?'

out from the page.

'Something like that,' Joe agreed, leaving with the box tucked under his

arm, the door letting in another hot breeze. Larry frowned to himself, Wide eyes, narrowed against the desert sun, gazed up at the cloudless wondering once again what the old Pole could be doing with all the sky, as if searching for something. Robert Agar himself, of course, didn't electronic stuff he'd been buying over the past few months. On impulse, really think of himself as having either particularly wide eyes or a and almost subconsciously, he stepped over to the window, from where particularly thin face but people rarely see themselves in quite the same he could see Joe nod amiably to Sheriff Brady as he passed by in his way that others do. He might, however, have agreed with Brady's squad car. Shaking his head, Larry stepped back from the window, as the assessment of him as a 'cupcake', since Agar himself was beginning to sheriff's car also vanished from sight.

doubt the stability of his own mind.

Unlike Brady or Muldoon, he didn't have to consult the copy of the

The tag reading 'S Brady' gleamed on the sheriff's barrel-chest as he got *Socorro Sun* in his glove compartment to find out about aliens. He had out of the Sheriff's Department Ford Thunderbird outside the County met them.

Sheriff's Office. He had already forgotten acknowledging Joe's nod

Fanning himself gently with his hat, he leaned against the warm metal

outside Larry's hardware store, his thoughts occupied by wondering of the car and searched the blue expanse above, ignoring the sulphur-whether anything of importance had happened over lunch. Somehow, he and-sawdust surface of the desert all around. The being he had told the man from the paper about had said that he and his people would meet

With the exception of the three equidistant hemispheres sited around

him again today; that fact, above all else, he recalled from the previous the circular exhaust on the lowermost surface, the disc was completely meeting. He had wanted to bring some friends along, but they had smooth and featureless, sunlight seeming to wash from its polished advised against it. Agar recalled the voice of the one who had seemed to surface like water from a duck's back. 'Stay where you are,' a melodic be their leader. It was a soothing and reasonable voice, which had told voice chimed. It was clearly an order, but its tone was not unkind. 'Do not him that one-to-one contact was best for now, as they did not wish to be afraid. We mean no harm to you.'

frighten their brothers on Earth unduly.

Agar already knew this from his previous meeting and strove not to feel

He wasn't sure that he understood what they meant by that, but it had fear. He couldn't help being a little shaky, however, and quite nervous. His seemed such a reasonable point of view that he couldn't really disagree legs too shaky to take him anywhere, he watched as the craft descended.

with them. He had to admit, however, that 'brothers on Earth' was an odd Three landing legs extended themselves from the underside, though there turn of phrase.

had been no sign either of them, or of any hatch-covers or mechanisms.

He wasn't about to let a trick of semantics dissuade him from seeing Silently, and without disturbing any dust, the disc settled onto the ground.

his unusual friends again, however, and he smiled contentedly at

the For a moment nothing happened, then an invisible seam parted in the

prospect. Somehow he felt at ease with them, unlike his fellow humans form of a door and a ramp lowered itself. No one emerged, but the implicit who always made him feel so small, like an insect crawling on the planet's invitation was plain. Taking a calming breath, Agar walked up the ramp, face.

having to bow his head slightly as he passed through the low door. On the

other side, he found himself in a smooth-walled chamber six feet across.

The forms of Agar and his car were no bigger than an ant as they glowed As he had done before, Agar squinted at the wall, trying to either spot the faintly within the spherical hologram viewer, the image clearly taken from seams or identify the strange metal it was made from. It certainly wasn't some point far above. The holosphere was one of many such devices steel, brass or any allow he was even remotely familiar with. Abruptly, an suspended in the centre of a round room like bubbles trapped in amber. inner door slid open and a man beckoned to him.

The spheres illuminated the room softly with the glow of dozens of The man was lean and clean-shaven, with straight shoulder-length

images, sensor read-outs and communications messages. Shadowy blond hair. He wore a pale blue overall of some smooth material, though, figures flitted around them, dancing through the air in the microgravity. try as he might, Agar could see no sign of any zippers or buttons. The The reflections of that light gave a chilling depth to the inky black eyes smooth chin was slightly narrow, and the man's large and slightly canted that peered out at them from bulbous, mushroom-coloured heads. eyes were a strange shade of violet that reminded Agar of his service in Although the electronics were all but silent, a faint susurration of whispery Korea five years earlier. 'Welcome, brother,' the man greeted him, his voices emanated from the shadows all around.

voice cultured yet toneless. 'We are glad you returned.'

Presently, one pair of midnight eyes glanced at Agar's image, and

'How could I stay away?' Agar asked, momentarily wondering why he

flickered over the glyphs that floated at the edges of the image. The hadn't.

watcher added its voice to the soft chorus, activating its communication

'This way,' the man said, gesturing through the inner door with a smile

line: 'Ph'Sor specimen #337. Execute collection as per Precept 1765-3.'

that looked genuine but flat, as if he had never smiled before and wasn't

'As you command, Captain,' a voice acknowledged. Satisfied, the sure how it was done. He led Agar into a larger chamber, twenty feet captain moved to consult another of the spheres which dotted the across and eight high. The centre of the room was dominated by two darkness.

hemispheres, each two feet high, one growing up from the floor while the

other bulged downwards from the ceiling. A thick, four-foot crystalline Agar somehow felt the presence of the craft before it appeared, his ears column, pulsating with blue light, joined the two domes. At the edges of popping under the pressure and his hair swirling as if from a static charge. the room, a series of partitions divided the surrounding area into alcove Apprehensive in spite of his excitement and curiosity, he looked up, tilting workstations. Several other men and women, all as exotic as the first, his head far enough back to make his neck ache. A few tens of metres were calmly at work in the alcoves, not even sparing a glance for Agar.

above, the sky shimmered and rippled as if it was a pool of blue ink into

Nervously, Agar stepped towards the nearest alcove, trying to spot

which someone had tossed a pebble. As the laws of optical physics some kind of recognizable instrumentation. It was a wasted effort as the reasserted themselves, the light ceased swirling as a large silver disc panels were all covered in some kind of touch-sensitive spots. There were swam into steady focus.

circular dials, but with no needles, pointers or incrementations.

Cautiously, he reached out towards one, but the man's long-fingered hand

* * *

blocked his path. 'Do not touch the consoles.'

No one was around in the garish desert countryside when a red Plymouth

'How can you tell what those meters are reading?' Agar asked convertible with white trim and, naturally, plenty of chrome, pulled to a halt curiously.

at the side of the road, wearing its cloud of tan dust like an Arab woman

The man looked at him steadily for a moment, his eyes distant and wears a yashmak.

unfocused, before answering. 'The degree of illumination indicates the

Almost immediately, the short man in the passenger seat got out and

status level,' he stated, turning away before a puzzled Agar could ask for looked around approvingly from under the sagging brim of a limp fedora clarification.

that matched the cream-coloured field of his rumpled linen suit, unbroken

Agar followed hastily as the man led him over to a glassy sphere which but for a jade Aztec brooch on his lapel. He had had to give special glowed with an inner fire. As Agar stood in front of it, the fuzzy glow gave instructions to Groenewegen's Millinery on Neo-Sydney to get the white way to a perfect three-dimensional image of a gladius-shaped vessel hat made, but it was worth it in climates like this. Ahead of him, a hazy basking in the unfiltered sunlight of a hight orbit. Though the image was sea of gleaming gypsum crystals glittered with the searing whiteness of only as large as Agar's hand, something about it gave him the impression an Alpine snowscape under the cloudless azure sky. The grey-blue tint of tremendous size and power. 'Is that how you came here?' he asked.

that the haze gave tot he surrounding mountains reinforced the

'It is our... mothership. It transported us from our planet.'

impression of coolness, despite the afternoon heat. A faint breeze wafted

'Which planet is that? Mars? Venus?'

across the sparkling sands with a scent of stone and dry spices. 'The old

There was another odd pause before the man nodded. 'Your home universe again,' the Doctor commented.

astronomers would term it Venus.'

Ace stood on the driver's seat and leaned the heels of her hands atop

Agar's breath caught in his throat. So Venus was inhabited by men and the windscreen, her 26th-century combat suit partially hidden by the long women as well! He tried to swallow his excitement and think of a rational black duster coat she occasionally wore. Mirrored sunglasses and a wide-question. 'What is it like there? I mean...' he racked his brain for the right brimmed black hat which kept half her face in shadow completed the words. 'What's the climate like? Do you live like us? How do you keep the ensemble. 'For how long?' she said suspiciously, surveying the gleaming peace?'

wilderness. 'Are you sure this is the real Earth and not the Twilight Zone?'

This time the pause was longer. For a worrying instant, Agar was

'Of course it is,' the Doctor answered crossly. He bent to scoop up a

afraid he wasn't going to get an answer at all. 'We have no crime,'

the handful of the glittering crystals, preferring them to her. 'White Sands.'

man - the Venusian, Agar reminded himself - replied finally. 'No wars. Our

Benny slid out of the back seat, a battered brown fedora jammed atop

life is... different. Because we have no diseases, our life expectancy

is her dark hair not quite managing to clash with her plain jeans and

reddish many times that of yours.' He made an adjustment to a control

and the checked workshirt. 'You're probably right - nobody would

create a climate view changed to that of artistically curved domes and

spires under a like this deliberately. What is this anyway? The waste-

tip from a salt vibrant golden sky. 'This is how we live.'

mine?' Ace nodded in sympathy.

Agar looked on in fascination. If he could only tell the world, he

'Hardly. Walk this way,' the Doctor said mysteriously, and hopped

thought. The papers would lap this up... 'Why do you come here?'

away from the car in a peculiar manner. When he saw that the women

'Observation.'

were strolling normally after him, he harrumphed loudly and wandered off

'To observe us, you mean?'

towards a low rise just to the left.

'No. For you to observe us.'

Benny followed, and Ace strolled after her, admiring the scenery but

Somewhat shocked, Agar looked at him blankly. 'I don't understand.'

not particularly inspired. Soon they topped the rise and the Doctor

'We are all brothers in this solar system. Your people must know

not to stopped to allow them to catch up. When they reached him they

drew to a feel... lonely. You may tell them of us.' The alien paused

again. 'You must halt, looking curiously on the scene below. 'Well, I'm

impressed,' the tell them of us,' he added.

Doctor prompted.

A chill touched Agar's spine as he wondered if the alien had read his

Spread out below the other side of the rise was a sprawling mass of

mind. 'One last thing. Do you have names?'

differently shaded surfaces that made up roads, parade grounds,

The alien man smiled faintly, and a little more naturally. 'You may call launching pads - some with metallic spires still in position - and low me... Xeno.' He led Agar to the doorway. 'Tell your people - do not be bunkers half-buried in the soil. Toy-sized people and vehicles moved afraid.'

along the greyish lines of the roads. A couple of miles beyond that were

the stretched-out runways and hangars of an airfield. 'That,' the Doctor

After a moment, the Doctor realized he was forging on alone, and said, pointing off towards the airfield, 'is Holloman Air Force Base.' He turned back to them. 'Don't you have any curiosity about the history of this spread his arms wide like a tour guide from hell. 'Welcome to White little planet of yours?' Ace ignored that: she'd proved just such an interest Sands Proving Grounds.'

many times before, and she knew he was only trying to wind her up. 'Or in

how man took the first tentative steps that would eventually lead to One of the minuscule vehicles crawling through the complex network of Spacefleet and beyond?' he went on. His tone was imploring as he roads at the heart of the Proving Grounds was a jeep moving at a stately returned to the two women, but Ace could see him realize that he wasn't five miles per hour. Caked in dust, it finally pulled off the narrow roadway really getting through to her. 'Look,' he added, 'how long have we and into a space between two blast walls at the back of a long, slope-travelled together?' He snapped up a hand in a silencing gesture before

walled concrete bunker. Two men in tan uniforms hopped out; the driver's she could answer. 'Exactly, and I've never got us killed not even once.'

sergeant's stripes wrinkling as he moved, while the passenger's peaked

'The lunar surface?' Ace put in with considerable patience.

cap betrayed his officer status even before his colonel's peps caught the

'Well... All right, just the once,' he admitted as Benny looked on sunlight. While the sergeant held the heavy door open, Colonel John C. blankly, 'but never since. So come on. It'll be all right - I have friends in Finney ducked into the cool shade of the launch control bunker. Even low places.' With that, he turned away and continued on towards the under the strong desert sun, the lights were on, since the narrow windows base.

were heavily tinted against the glare.

Ace and Benny exchanged weary looks. Ace knew they would

In the sunken area in the middle of the bunker, a row of circular radar probably have to give in, since when the Doctor was in this sort of mood screens and bulky predictor calculating machines crouched against the there was no point in arguing. He was set on seeing the base and that back wall. A clique of shirt-sleeved technicians patrolled the machines was that. Still, she recalled with a faint rush of hope, he had claimed to watchfully, taking note of every reading. On the far wall, a platform ran have brought the TARDIS here to show Benny this place. Perhaps, she below the thick windows with a field telephone beside each one. Next to though, that could be turned into an advantage. She ran to catch up. 'I the door was an array of radio equipment, while a number of men were thought you said there was something you wanted to show Benny.'

marking plottings on a plexiglass partition that separated the machines

'Yes, of course. As an archaeologist, the earliest orbital vehicles from the observation platform. A couple of interior doors led off from the produced by humanity should be of interest to her.' He looked at Benny main room, but were closed. 'Duty Officer,' Finney called.

for confirmation. The look on her face was all he needed. '1957 seemed

'Sir?' Lieutenant Wood stepped smartly over.

like a suitable time,' he finished.

'What's the status of the launch crew?'

'In that case,' Benny put in, 'wouldn't a more panoramic view be in

'They checked in just before you arrived, sir,' the young lieutenant order?' She pointed in the direction of several tine figures swarming reported. 'Fuelling is complete and they're now engaged in the final around a rocket on a launch pad. 'There seems to be some activity going preflight.'

on down there, so a nice high vantage point would be better to watch a

'Good,' Finney nodded. His slate-grey eyes flickered towards a launch from, wouldn't it?' Ace breathed a silent sigh of relief.

technician who was talking softly on one of the field telephones while

'Well, I suppose that's one way of looking at it.' He peered around at

ticking off items on a clipboard. His craggy face shifted in a smile. 'The the surrounding low hills, then pointed to a shaded rock outcrop with his test is on schedule.'

umbrella. 'How about there?'

'Perfect,' Ace agreed quickly.

Gently, twirling the question-mark-handled umbrella he was using as a

'All right.' He started off towards the outcrop with as much visible zeal

parasol, the Doctor strode on ahead, whistling some jaunty tune, as Ace as he had displayed in his intention to visit the Proving Grounds. 'These and Benny hurried to keep up.

are important times, Benny,' he began, without pausing for breath.

'You don't intend to just walk into a Cold War base, surely?' Ace called 'Mankind is just preparing to enter the big wide world that is the universe, out to him. 'They'd probably shoot us, just in case.'

and it's from places like this that he'll take his first steps over the frontier

'You've been watching too many cheap TV shows, Ace.'

that is Earth's atmosphere...'

'Sod that!' She halted immediately, Benny drawing up beside her.

'Wait a minute,' Benny began slowly. 'When we landed last night, you

She'd learned to live the permanent threat of death, since space travel in said this was the beginning of October, right?' Humming noncommittally in her experience was inherently dangerous, but on Earth in the Fifties?

answer, the Doctor looked back at her owlishly. 'So,' she went on, 'why

didn't you just take us to the launch of Sputnik?'

side were beginning to bubble and split. This was an irrelevant occurance

'Ah, that,' the Doctor murmured, shifting uncomfortably, or even - which the designers had anticipated, but there are always events which thought Ace - guiltily. 'There are at least two of me there already, and if I can never be anticipated or prepared for. One such event was outside go as well, it'd treble the risk of me bumping into himself.' He paused as if interference from an unknown quarter.

to check on the logic of what he had just said. 'You've no idea how Growing larger with increasing proximity by the moment, the missile

embarrassing that can be,' he added finally.

was already a pen-sized rod in the glowing holosphere, inhuman eyes

concentrating on it as luminescent glyphs and grid marking scrolled Without lowering the binoculars he had trained on the launch pad, Colonel around it.

Finney slashed his free arm down in a chopping motion towards

'Intercept vector plotted and laid in, Commander.'

Lieutenant Wood. The younger man immediately lifted the bakelite phone

'Prepare to redirect graviton field.'

beside him and barked the order to fire.

Half a mile from the blast-proof bunker the men were stationed in, a Finney's blood froze in his veins as the mirror-like disc appeared in the plume of smoke billowed from a sunken launch pad, and a blaze of white-missile's path. A bright flash seared his eyes, the green and purple spots

hot flame speared into the sky, forcing the sixty-foot Atlas missile out of its it left on is retinas fading to show the disc heading towards the base in a cradle into the blue yonder.

dive. Beyond, the missile was tumbling like a twig in a breeze, smoke

Behind Finney, three airmen sat hunched over the green radar screens streaming not just from the exhaust but also from a point just behind the and telemetry read-outs. 'Bird is airborne,' one called out. 'Burn is good.'

nose-cone.

'Plotted and on track,' someone reported from the plexiglass partition.

By the time the low rumble of the blast reached the bunker, the bloom

'T plus five, board is green.'

of fire that marked the missile's passing had already faded, to leave only a

Finney grinned behind the binoculars, following the missile's progress trailing pall of smoke which drifted across the desert sands like a ghostly through the sky with interest. If the programme went well, he knew, they shadow.

would be able to toss warheads at the Soviets - or anyone else - without

Leaping from the raised platform, and grimacing as his left leg hit the

every leaving home soil. No one need ever go through an experience like floor, Finney snatched the phone from the startled Wood. 'This is Finney -

Chosin again. He shuddered involuntarily at the memories the name orange alert! Scramble the Ranger team, I'm coming over.' Beckoning to inspired, and wondered if he would ever be able to face flying again. It the sergeant who had driven him to the bunker, Finney hurried to the was a shame, he felt, that the project was so highly classified, as he door.

would have been proud to be seen as one of the people who had

made
such an achievement possible.
The Doctor had leapt from his rocky perch and was half-way down the
'Primary burn complete. Solid burn within projected tolerances.'
slope before Ace and Benny even heard the explosion. Momentarily
'Gyros stable at eight-five.'
stunned, they suddenly realized what was happening and dashed after
'Altitude now Angels nine-nine and climbing.'
him.
'Status of recorders,' Finney demanded.
'All film cameras functioning normally,' Wood announced. 'Minor
In a dispersal area beside a runway at Holloman, two pilots clambered
distortion to closed-circuit television.'
hastily into the cockpits of their F-86 Sabres. While their harried
ground
'Oh?' Finney craned his head around to a point where he could see
crews disconnected fuel pipes and snapped ammunition-loading
panels one of the small monochrome screens that displayed a fuzzy
image of the closed, the two pilots ran through hurried preflight
checks. By the time missile. He nodded to himself. 'It'll pass. Get it
fixed for the next test, they had finished, the ground crews were
scattering out of the way across though.' He returned to watching the
missile through the binoculars. His the baking concrete.
father and older brother wouldn't call this real soldiery, he knew,
but this
As the deep roar of the engines began to counterpoint the rising
whine
was his command, so he didn't care about their opinions. More of
the turbofans, they taxied out onto the runway. As soon as they
accurately, he reflected, he did care but wasn't going to let the fact
affect reached its end, they hurtled down the long concrete strip,
banking to his actions.
follow the course of the mysterious disc the moment their wheels
left the
ground.
The steel skin of the Atlas was so hot that the stencilled markings
on its

* * *

Finney took the steel steps two at a time to get up to the top of the
control for questioning.' He left the set on receive after that, a faint
static buzz tower at Holloman. Favouring his left leg as he burst in, he
made straight issuing from the helmet speakers.

for the nearest radar screen. 'Status?'

He blinked curiously - was it his imagination, or was the gleaming disc

'Ranger team is catching up with the bogey, heading north,' the young getting larger? The hell with it, he told himself. This is a fine airplane, not operator reported. 'They're pushing their fuel expenditure to the limit, a one-shot missile. 'Unidentified aircraft, identify yourself immediately or though.'

be fired upon.'

'That doesn't matter,' Finney snapped, unable to conceal let alone There was no reaction, save that the disc continued to grow in the

control his irritation. 'I want this stopped.'

windscreen. Well, Stephens thought, they were over an unpopulated area

where no harm could come to women or kids. Wondering absently if the

Xeno, the alien whom Agar had spoken to, held onto the low command disc had a red start painted on its side, he pressed the trigger.

stool as the ground flashed past in the holosphere. 'How long until we can

Abruptly, the disc flared. For the briefest of instants, Stephens thought

re-engage the graviton drive?'

it had exploded under the cannonfire, but the truth became obvious when

'Seventeen seconds. Gravimetric interference from the Earth's an unseen hand - which Stephens' rapidly numbing mind barely magnetosphere in this area is slowing our rate of recharge.'

recognized as an exceptionally powerful slipstream - batted the Sabre

'The humans will be within firing range by now. New course one-eight—

across the sky. Hauling on the stick while the desert floor did insane zero mark three-one-five. Implement one second before resumption of cartwheels above his head, Stephens fought both to stay conscious under graviton drive.'

the pressure that was tightening around his head, and to steady the

'As you command.'

aircraft before it went into a flat spin.

After a few moments, during which his eyeballs threatened to escape

Captain Bruce Stephens kept a firm hand on the throttle while scanning their sockets, Stephens finally managed to right the aircraft.

A glance at for the disc. The faint pitching of the aircraft was reassuring to him, the instrument panel showed all the dials spinning as crazily as the sky reminding him that he was given the gift of being able to defy gravity by had done a few seconds ago. Turning his head delicately so that it the F-86H. A quick glance over his shoulder gave him a view of his wouldn't fall off, he saw a few streamers of smoke trailing earthwards wingman's F-86F just beyond his port wingtip.

beyond his starboard wing, and no other sign of his wingman. But, he

'Ranger leader, this is control. Bogey is at four-zero-zero m.p.h., vector asked himself, where was the disc? Craning his head in all directions, he two-eight-seven for intercept.'

couldn't see it, and his ragged breath steadied slightly. Dogfights weren't

'Roger control. Ranger leader out.' Banking to port, Stephens had a supposed to be like this, he screamed silently to himself. Remembering brief blurry view of the rippling desert below before he straightened the the radio, he reset its frequency and called Holloman.

aircraft onto a course parallel to the Zuni mountains in the direction of the

'Control from Ranger leader...' He wondered if that was really his own

Rio Grande and Acoma. The western curve of Route 54 vanished behind voice echoing through the helmet speakers. It never used to sound as and below him as he thumbed the arming switch for the gun-camera and quavery as that, did it?

four 20mm cannons. Changing frequencies, he called on his wingman to

arm his own gun camera and six 30-calibre machine-guns.

A vacuum had opened up under Finney's breastbone, and threatened to

Stephens knew it wasn't just the lower pressure of the altitude that allow everything beyond to burst free and escape. Only when the voice made his blood sing as he flew. True, being up here like a bird did bestow screeched over the radio could he finally tear his eyes away from the a certain feeling of freedom, but the fact that being a fighter-jock was a sickly green radar display, which had just showed the events in the sky quick route to promotion was the most important facet for him.

with frightening simplicity.

Some distance ahead, something flashed briefly and glinted in the

The green pixels of the disc's sudden acceleration, followed by its afternoon sunlight. He was sure there was only one thing it could be. signal's merging with that of the downed F-86F, had engraved

themselves Switching the radio to a broadband setting, he thumbed the mike. If truth into Finney's mind as effectively and lastingly as an epitaph is carved into be told, he was half-hoping that communication would do no good - he a tombstone. He hadn't needed to see what had happened to the disc, had long wanted to know how the nose-mounted cannons would perform certain that it had just shot up into the sky and disappeared. At least, in real combat. 'Unidentified aircraft, you are in violation of military that's what they usually did.

airspace. Identify yourself and prepare to be escorted back to our airfield

He glanced around at the rest of the tower crew, their eyes reflecting

enough of those tombstones for an entire graveyard. 'Tell him to come on

home,' Finney ordered. 'We'll have someone waiting to meet him.'

Pausing until the crew had shakily - but nevertheless efficiently - returned **Chapter 2**

to their work, Finney lifted a phone from one wall and dialled a single digit.

'OSI? Finney here, at the tower. We have a Code Blue, is Kreer available? Good. Get him up here on the double.' He hung up the phone The Doctor vaulted over the car door with surprising agility, dropping into and turned back to survey the room.

his seat as Ace and Benny got in more normally. The smell of the leather

A few moments later, the tinny click of the door handle opposite drew upholstery, after it had basked in the sun for a while, was strange to Finney's attention. As it opened, he was relieved to see that his orders Benny, but she refrained from saying anything when neither of the others had been promptly acted upon.

mentioned it. It must just be one of those things the history books don't

Two men, in formal air force blues rather than the usual tropical say, she thought. Although the Plymouth didn't give as smooth a ride as uniform, stepped silently into the cluttered control room. The first was a an air-car, she had to admit it did have a certain style. It occurred to her chiselled-featured blond man with pale eyes and wavy hair. He set his that if she could have returned one of these cars to her own time she'd be briefcase atop the nearest radar console as the second, dark-haired man financially set for life.

entered. This man had a fuller face, but his thin lips formed a surprisingly

Ace gunned the engine and swung back onto the road. 'The

Proving

charming smile as his dark eyes surveyed the assembled men. 'Please Grounds, I presume?' she suggested.

excuse us, gentlemen,' he began affably, 'but I must make certain The Doctor remained silent for a moment. 'No,' he answered finally.

demands on your time.' He held up a wallet to display an ID card which 'They certainly wouldn't let us walk in now. Bad news travels faster than was stamped with the letters AFOSI. 'I am Major Kreer of the Air Force anything else I can think of, so by the time we get into Alamagordo, we Office of Special Investigations,' he began. 'This is my aide, Captain should be able to pick up more details from Rumour Control.' He pointed Stoker.' The blond man nodded.

ahead of them with his ubiquitous umbrella. 'Home, James.'

'We will debrief you about this incident,' Kreer explained, his voice Ace nodded and set the car in motion. 'At lease we're travelling in a bit

displaying a certain amount of relish. 'I must first warn you that this of style this time,' she commented, unconsciously echoing Benny's own incident will be classified at Majestic level, and that any breach of security appreciation.

surrounding it is a federal offence under the regulations of JANAP 146.'

'I suppose we are,' the Doctor answered thoughtfully, his face clouding.

Finney left quietly as Kreer began his spiel. Something about those two 'Just don't ever - and I mean ever - tell me where you got this car.'

made the hair rise on the back of his neck, and it wasn't just the fact that

they were representatives of the air force's closest thing to a secret police A quarter of a mile upslope, a man with short-cropped hair of pale blond force. For a moment, he thought he might be allowing himself to be watched the car leave, not through binoculars but through a small prejudiced by the way they had all but ignored him. He dismissed the rectangular plate. Even though his tan uniform had hidden him idea, but then looked back as another thought occurred. Even though sufficiently, he nevertheless stepped back into the shadow of a large these discs had been seen many times of late, the rest of the men were boulder before tapping the small but solid bulge at the right-hand side of still unnerved by them. Why were those two so calm about the whole his neck. 'Targets have left enroute for Alamagordo. Alteration to previous thing, he wondered.

data; there are three targets: the Doctor, the human female known as

Ace, and a second human female.'

The anonymous watcher was only a flyspeck against the expanse of desert, which was in itself merely a tiny patch on the rough surface of the

Earth. There were no discs above him, and so he did not appear in any of

the holospheres that surrounded the dwarfish captain who was listening

to his report. The captain ignored the other small grey beings who were

working at the surrounding circle of holospheres, concentrating instead on

the report issuing from the speaker fixed above his command seat. 'Noted

and logged,' the captain snapped when the watcher had finished giving

his description of the other woman who accompanied the Doctor and Ace. the keys to the building you have arranged to lease. Each is labelled for

'Return to Stoker's unit at once.'

your convenience, and I hope you and your friends enjoy your stay in

'As you command.'

New Mexico." ' He slipped the letter into a pocket and swiftly found the

'Surgeon-Major,' the captain said, switching to the intercom.

front door key. Opening the door, he motioned to Ace and Benny to enter.

'Your command, Captain?' the voice answered.

'I don't suppose it says how long we're going to have stayed?' Benny

'Extend full pressurization and life-support to all sections of the ship. asked dryly.

When complete, notify the Triumvirate that they may take full command of

'I'm afraid not. I probably asked them not to mention it.'

the mission.'

'As you command.'

Joseph Wiesniewski balanced the electrical goods from the store in the

crook of one arm, while he retrieved the latest issue of *QST* magazine

Kreer pocketed the small crystal that was in his hand as he left the control from his mailbox.

tower. 'You should have let me administer the full neural inhibiter,' Stoker

Pushing open his front door, he dropped the magazine onto the

opined, following him out.

telephone table and carried his recent purchases down into the cellar.

'That would not have been sufficiently selective,' Kreer said There, opposite the washer/drier his wife had bought a couple of years dismissively. 'Such total amnesia would have been suspicious. As it is, ago - despite his insistence that it was a noisy piece of junk - were ranged anyone who asks will simply assume that the staff are following a series of plain grey and green metal boxes, with dials and knobs set into regulations not to talk.'

them. Pinned onto a board on the wall above were sheets covered in

'What about the surviving pilot?'

names and frequencies. Joe sat down to examine his new purchases,

'His mind will be too disrupted to be properly responsive, but I believe running mentally through the procedures he would use to wire them into we can quiet him too. A few words with the medical staff are in order.'

his set-up. It wouldn't be a difficult job, at least not for someone with his

experience of signalling during the second world war.

Ace halted the car in the driveway of a sprawling one-storey building Whistling an old folk tune, he went back upstairs to fetch the magazine,

about half a mile outside of town. Long wings stretched to either side, which was the favourite of his various radio-ham club magazines.

though no lights shone in any windows. Just outside the front double—

doors, a pole was topped with a sign reading 'Starlight Motel'. The word In his sitting room, tinted in warm colours by the setting sun, Brady

'MOTEL' was repeated in three-foot-high letters above the entrance, the groaned as the already fuzzy rendition of *I Love Lucy* on the TV screen letters formed of light bulbs, none of which were working. A windblown degenerated completely into a haze of snow. 'Aw jeez, what now?' he and dusty star hung crookedly below. The dining area had the word groaned.

'SODA' in faded paintwork above boarded-up windows. 'At least it's not as

'TV on the fritz again?' Jeanette asked, popping her head round the
bad as Rura Pontins. I've been meaning to ask,' Ace said to the Doctor, partition from the kitchen.
'just how you come to have all these homes dotted around?'
'Yeah,' her husband nodded, glowering at the flickering screen. 'It was
'Oh, they're not homes,' the Doctor replied in a relaxed tone. 'It's just a bad enough when Joe first put up that aerial of his, but now...'
matter of remembering to pop back after we leave here, and rent this
'I'll speak to his wife tomorrow,' she promised, returning to the kitchen.
place for ourselves before we arrive - retrospectively, as it were.' He got
Brady nodded glumly. He wondered if the local kids would be causing
out of the car.
trouble at Joe's place again that night. It wouldn't be the first time over the
'You can't do that,' Benny protested, disembarking and following him to past few months; ever since he put the aerial up, in fact. Perhaps, he the door. 'It's just-'
thought, I should have a quiet word with him in the morning.
'Paradoxical? Unethical? A two-fingered salute to Time Lord law?
Outside, in the slightly darkening sky, something shimmered briefly, a
Basically there isn't much choice in the matter when you're as unsure pulsing glow flitting across the sky.
about the next destination as I usually am.' Tilting aside a plant pot that
resided next to the door, the Doctor retrieved a set of keys and an The captain stood deferentially as Councillors Tzashan and Sr'Shol of the envelope from under it, brandishing them triumphantly. Inside the Triumvirate entered the command area amidst the circle of holospheres envelope was a short letter. 'It's from the estate agent,' he explained, 'or that separated it from the rest of the bridge. The two new arrivals were perhaps I should say realtor, since this is America. "Dear Doctor, here are taller than he was, but would still be small for a human. Their dead-looking skin was masked with shadows as they entered. 'At ease,'

* * *

Tzashan - the slightly taller of the pair - nodded.
Jack Siegel relaxed, the weariness dropping form his shoulders as his hat

'Thank you, Second Councillor. Surgeon-Major Ksal has completed his dropped from his hand onto the nearest hook.

report: there are no complications arising from your suspension in stasis

He considered his hat to be as much his badge of office as the sheriff's

for the journey.'

star was Brady's, and consequently always felt much more off-duty once

'Has the Doctor made any move yet?'

he took it off. His gaze flicked briefly to his father's portrait, recalling how

'Negative,' the captain replied calmly, confirming the fact on a read-out. the old man had always said that a farmer, like a policeman, was never

'He witnessed the destruction of the missile, however, so we can expect really off-duty. 'Sorry, dad,' he muttered, before going into the kitchen.

him to do so.;

The rest of the family had already eaten, and he could faintly hear the

'What is the status of the compatibility trials?'

half-coherent sounds of the TV in the sitting room, but someone had left a

'The Ph'Sor,' he said, indicating a display of Xeno and his crew, 'are plate of steaming stew at his place on the table in anticipation of his conducting disinformation exercises by day with humans who are, or return. He thought it most likely that they'd heard him out at the stable.

could be, influential. By night, my S'Raph pilots,' he gestured at the Deciding that the deep plate was unlikely to allow any gravy to spill,

smaller beings manning the sensor stations all around, 'are sampling and therefore willing to risk his wife's wrath, Jack lifted it up, along with a suitable physical specimens. 'Surgeon-Major Ksal reports that full towel, and moved carefully through to join the others in the lounge. The compatibility will be achieved soon.'

rest of the family were gathered around the TV set; Donna throwing him a

disapproving look from her chair, while his brother Rick and his wife Since the three kitchen fridges were all unstocked, it had seemed reclined on the settee. The kids were scattered across the carpet in front reasonable that the time-travellers should eat out. Benny jumped at the of the TV like windblown tumbleweeds. 'What's on the boob-tube?'

chance; it wasn't often that she got to have a night out on the town on

'OSS,' Donna replied. 'You know you shouldn't have that plate in here,'

Earth, and she wasn't about to pass up a chance to paint it red.

she added half-scoldingly.

Unfortunately, Ace was unwilling to drive all the way back to the

'I know,' he agreed with an inward smile. Her disapproving look made

TARDIS to fetch suitable eveningwear, protesting that even an army of her seem more sultry somehow, but he had never dared to tell her so. He only three still marched on its stomach. Although the Doctor had tried to suspected that she knew anyway, and played up to it, but he didn't really mollify her by pointing out that they were merely going to a local diner, not want to spoil the game. 'It's a deep plate and I got a towel, OK?' he the Savoy, Benny was still somewhat morose about going out in jeans grinned.

and workshirt. 'Anyway,' she asked as they cruised along the streets at

'Aw, rats,' Jack's eldest offspring, Jack Junior groaned.

dusk, 'why not the Savoy?'

'What's up, Jay?' both parents asked together. Jack needed no

'Apart from the fact that there isn't one in New Mexico, you mean?' the answer, however, as he could see for himself the snowy fuzz that had Doctor asked teasingly. 'Cafeterias, diners and the like are all good blanketed the TV screen and blotted out Ron Randell's wartime exploits.

sources of local news. So, if we're going to find out what happened here 'Gone on the fritz, huh?' Jack grimaced and set the plate down on the today, one of those would be a good place to start.'

coffee table. 'I'll go out and check the antenna. There might be a bird

'I see.' Benny gave his back a sour look. 'Here endeth the lesson for sitting on it or something,' he suggested. Certainly, he knew, there had today?'

been no strong winds to blow it down.

'Experience counts.'

Outside, the sun was sinking in the west, turning the rocky desert to a

'Batmobile at eleven o'clock,' Ace announced. Benny and the Doctor shadowy vision of hell while the sky turned pink and purple when Jack re-looked across to see a Sheriff's Department car parked outside a window emerged from the house. He circled the building a few yards out from the marked 'George's Rib Room'. The place looked

inviting enough, Benny walls, trying to get a good view of the TV antenna, and finally found such thought, if nothing particularly special despite its carefully engraved a spot at the base of the chimney. Squinting up at it, he judged it to look window decoration.

the same as always. His eyes were glued to a patch of pastel sky to the

'Perfect!' the Doctor crowed. 'Let's see what we can hear from the west. There, high above the foothills beyond the farm, two pearlescent horse's mouth.'

ovals drifted silently, pulsing with inner light.

'Right.' Ace threw the car into a U-turn, and parked just behind the

As Jack went back inside, the two ovoids sank behind the hills with the

police car. 'Looks like they've got a couple of tables to spare.'

sun, casting a pale luminescence on the rocks.

* * *

Russians more than anything else. She looked up as Sara returned with

Benny, Ace, and the Doctor took a table next to a Sheriff's Department two large platters, which she deposited in front of the Doctor and Ace.

deputy. The deputy was a Hispanic, and was talking to a man in a Each was heaped with scrambled eggs on a tortilla, and covered with business suit who almost had 'travelling salesman' tattooed on his chilli and melted cheese. Spicy red sausages were at either side, but, forehead. All three time travellers pretended to be more interested in the before she could speculate on their origin, Sara reappeared with her decor, which mixed Spanish and Mexican styles with those of the Zuni posole.

and Navajo peoples, than in their neighbours at the next table. Benny

'Thanks,' Benny murmured, and stirred the soup with a spoon. It

looked around to see if there was a waiter or waitress in the vicinity, and appeared to have something like popcorn floating in it, and it smelled was rewarded with the sight of a dusky, almond-eyed woman heading strongly of garlic and chilli.

towards their table from behind the long bar.

'Lime hominy and pork,' the Doctor announced, and Benny realized he

'Hi,' the woman began cheerily. 'I'm Sara; how can I be of help to you?'

must have seen her wrinkle her nose a little at the scent.

Benny noticed that the Doctor didn't bother looking at the menu.

'Sounds more like a cocktail.' Tentatively, she tasted a drop. It wasn't

'Huevos rancheros e chorizos, por favor,' he said, with a disarming smile.

too bad, but the tanginess would take some getting used to. Ace,

'I'll have the same,' Ace shrugged.

meanwhile, was wolfing straight into her platter with obvious relish while

Benny scanned the menu before her, but little of it made any sense. the Doctor, as usual, seemed content to simply pick at his food for the

'Do you have any soup?' she asked, falling back on the old travellers' sake of appearances as he watched the other patrons. The deputy rose, stand-by.

paying his bill at the bar, and Benny sipped the soup thoughtfully.

'Sure, there's posole.'

'I'll have that, then,' Benny confirmed, giving Sara a winning smile.

Rick and his wife Mary were putting their two children to bed, as Donna

'I won't be long,' Sara promised, leaving for the kitchen door behind the was tucking in Jay, when they first heard the sound. A strange scratching bar. With no other distractions around, Benny let her attention stray and scraping, accompanied by what sounded like soft footfalls, was towards the deputy at his table, while ostensibly studying the menu.

filtering down through the bedroom ceilings.

The deputy was shaking his head as the salesman's voice started to

Jack came up at once, as Donna's startled call joined Rick's puzzled

show strain at what Benny strongly suspected was the effort of trying to one. Bounding up the stairs gracefully, he halted on seeing the three get through to him with out actually shouting across the diner. 'I tell you, I worried faces waiting for him on the landing. Mary's head was tilted as if saw it as clear as day; a disc like...' He lifted the saucer out from under his trying to determine the direction the sound was coming from, while Rick coffee cup, and waved it under the deputy's nose. 'Like two of these fingered a shotgun nervously. 'What is it?' Jack asked.

joined at the edges, but all made of silver. Two jets were chasing it out of

'There's someone of the roof,' Rick whispered.

Holloman.'

'You're kidding, right?'

'You been paying too much attention to those freakos in the paper,

'We all heard him,' Donna told him.

Frank.'

'Them,' Mary corrected her. 'I think there are two or three of them out

'Jesus, come on - it's me. I'm not talking about these nuts with their there.'

"space brothers" crap! Are you trying to tell me you haven't seen one of

'Okay,' Jack said slowly, the looks in his family's eyes convincing him

these things in the last couple of months? They've been all over the that they weren't joking. 'Hang on to that twelve-gauge, Rick, and I'll get place.'

the 30-06. Then we'll go take a look.' He slipped back down the stairs,

'Look, Frank, I was over at Holloman yesterday, taking over the week's making for the gun rack in the hall. As he lifted the Winchester free, a supply of saucer reports. Wouldn't they have said something if these frenzied barking and whinnying erupted outside. 'What the hell...?' he things really existed?'

grumbled, snatching the rifle from the rack.

'Not if they don't want to announce to the voters and taxpayers that

Rick and the women descended, bringing the children. The youngest

foreign aircraft of some kind are buzzing our bases, and that our planes was eight, so none of them were crying, but they all looked hunted, their can't stop them.'

eyes darting about. 'What's wrong with Jerry and Dino?' Jay asked.

'That's true, I suppose...' the deputy answered in a slightly mollified

'Same as what's bothering us and spooking the horses, I expect. Come

tone which made Benny grimace as if there was something distasteful in on, Rick,' he urged, slipping ammunition into the rifle as he walked to the the air. Obviously, she thought, this pair preferred to worry about door. As Rick opened it, Jack turned to the others. 'Keep the door locked -

just in case.' With that, he followed Rick outside.

It was Sara who approached Benny's bar stool. 'What'll it be?'

There was no sign of anyone around as they stepped off the porch and

'A Spine-Spinner?' she asked hopefully.

away from the house. For the second time that night, Jack stepped away,

'This isn't Las Vegas,' Sara answered in a not unkind tone.

trying to get a good view of the roof. As they walked, they came into sight

'Warnog? Zombie?'

of Jerry and Dino, the two German Shepherds, in their fenced-off little

Sara shook her head.

enclosure. The dogs began to bark more furiously, tails wagging in relief;

'Vodka Martini? Shaken, not stirred,' she added, a little self—

or so Jack guessed. The horses in the stable whinnied fearfully and consciously.

stamped their hooves, though there was no sign of whatever was causing

'Coming right up.' Sara took a glass from under the counter and started

their agitation.

filling it from the relevant bottles. 'You're obviously not from around here.

An abrupt sound of movement drew their attention as soon as their The other girl sounds English-'

backs were turned to the house to investigate the stable. Spinning back

'She is.'

round, Jack saw a small shadowy figure flit around the corner of the

'And the man sounds like he's from Scotland-'

house and vanish into the encroaching darkness. 'Did you get a look at

'Probably.'

him?' he asked Rick. 'Looked like a kid.'

'But your accent, I can't place.'

'One weird kid, then. I just caught a glimpse, but it moved way too

'I'm from...' Benny paused. Clearly she couldn't tell the truth, so she

weird for a kid.' They had already reached the corner of the house. tried to think of somewhere suitably colonial that couldn't be seen as a Rounding it, they looked westwards. A faint glow lit the foothills eerily and hostile power in the Cold War era. 'Australia,' she finished finally, fervently Jack had to fight to suppress a shudder.

hoping that Sara had never heard a genuine Australian accent.

Without warning, something dropped from the sky, slamming into the

'Really? So what brings you to New Mexico?'

two men and knocking them into a sprawling heap. Jack rolled with his

'I'm an archaeologist.'

own momentum, and rose to a kneeling position in an instant. Vanishing

'No kidding?' Sara brightened considerably. 'Taking a look at the

ahead was a stalky figure, less like a young vandal than some kind of Carlsbad caverns?'

monkey. Unsure as to whether it was the same one they had seen a

'I have seen them, yes.' In about half a millennium, she added silently.

moment ago, or another of the same type of creature, Jack fired at it as it

'There's an old pueblo much nearer here, you know. Some people

dashed for the water tower. Rick also fired a blast from the twelve-gauge, think it may be Anasazi. It was discovered only very recently.'

but there came no cry of pain or thud of a falling body.

'There is? Where?' Perhaps this trip wouldn't be a total loss, she

'Here's an idea,' Rick suggested. 'We go back to the house and lock though.

ourselves in. That definitely wasn't no kid.'

'Just off Route 54. You can't miss it - there's a turning off to a farm just

'You're damn right it wasn't, but I want a good look at whatever it was.' outside of town, and the pueblo is in the hills beyond that.'

Cautiously, Jack edged towards the water tower, the ghost stories of their

'Thank you,' Benny said with feeling. 'Oh, there is one other thing -

old Navajo cook coming back to haunt his mind.

about your beer glasses...'

'Anything from anyone?' Benny asked.

When it came, it was with the speed of a jet. Emerging from the lee of the

'Not really.' The Doctor shook his head. 'Half these people seem to water tower, a spindly grey form with night-black eyes that looked straight think the disc was a secret American craft out of control, and the other through the men hurtled spiderlike across the intervening ground, its stick-half reckon it was a Russian spy-plane of some kind.'

thin limbs propelling it with unnatural agility.

'The exception,' Ace added, pointing to a thin-faced, wide-eyed man in

Yelling in horror for the women to stay indoors, Jack and Rick each

the corner, 'being that guy' his story being that they're space brothers loosed a shot at the creature before bolting for the safety of the house.

come to save us from ourselves. How about you?'

Mary had already slammed the door, leaving them to crash helplessly into

'The deputy thinks it's Russian.' She looked over at the bar. Now and it, carried on by their own momentum.

again she would ask herself if trying to visit every bar in the history of the

Pounding on the door, they glanced fearfully back, to see only empty

universe and acquire one of their beer glasses was a frivolous hobby for ground between them and the water tank. From behind the door came the an archaeologist. Her answer to herself was invariably 'no'. 'I won't be metallic scraping of the bold being drawn. Relieved, Jack took half a step long,' she informed her friends, getting up from the table.

back, to let Rick through the opening door.

As soon as his shoulder jutted beyond the eave of the porch,

something snatched it in a steely grip. A pair of thin but incredibly strong

arms had swung down from the awning and sunk long talons into his **Chapter 3**

shoulders. Jack barely had time to look up into the empty black eyes

staring out from the bulbous head above before, with a terrified howl, he

was pulled up out of sight.

Major Marion Davison climbed the tower steps eagerly, her notebook and

Rick stuffed a pair of cartridges into the shotgun as Jack's cry echoed pen held tightly in one hand. As she was in charge of press and public on. Before he could use them, he was knocked off his feet and blown relations for the whole southern sector of Air Defence Command, she had through the door by an invisible hand that left him out cold.

been avoiding her office for the past few hours, knowing only too well that

With a continuing high-pitched whine, the unseen force then slammed the phone would have been ringing all day with calls from news agencies into Mary, hurling her aside.

and local stations, all wanting to know the official position on what they

The whine continued for a very short time.

would undoubtedly refer to as the 'flying saucer'.

Davison would have liked to think that she could have told them something about it. This wasn't going to happen, though; the AFOSI representatives had already given her the bones of a dismissal story to be written. They were claiming that a weather balloon, launched as part of the preflight activity, had somehow come down and become entangled with the missile. Everyone on base knew differently, of course, but none of them were willing to risk the steep penalties that would follow any such revelation.

Theoretically, Davison knew, she could just go ahead and write the cover story. She could issue it to the locals without bothering to check the background to it. That wasn't her style, however. She had been intrigued by the disc or discs, ever since she first saw it - or one - several months earlier.

Davison had joined the air force in the hope of becoming a pilot, and flying like a bird. Women were only permitted to be transport pilots, of course, but she felt that was enough. The injuries she'd received in training had put paid to that ambition, however. Instead, her grades and former position on her high-school newspaper had convinced her superiors to assign her to military journalism, and her natural curiosity had agreed with the sentiment. Therefore, although her job didn't always require the precise truth to be told, she liked to ferret out the facts just for the record, and for personal satisfaction.

Searching for facts on a military base wasn't exactly encouraged, of course, and she did get the occasional suspicious look while on duty. For that reason, she was most at home digging through reports and researches rather than actually interviewing people. She wondered fleetingly how the tower crew would react to her today, and paused for breath outside the door. Though only in her early twenties and leanly built,

she felt the way that Alfred Hitchcock might if he'd had to run a marathon.

She filed a thought to apply for quarters nearer the centre of the base.

Next to the door, above the fire extinguisher and safety notices, was a

sign reading 'Loose lips sink ships.' She shook her head wearily - didn't

they know the war was over? Or were they just preparing for the next a searching expression. 'Something wrong?'

one? Never mind, she told herself, just don't say it aloud.

'I just had that feeling - you know, somebody walking over your grave.'

Of course, there were certain advantages to her position. She was the

'Interesting,' he murmured inscrutably.

one person who might be positively expected to ask questions about the

'Aren't we going to be poking our noses into that flying saucer?'

day's events, even if she was nervous about it. She didn't want to shirk

'Probably, but there are so many things zipping around Earth's

her duty, did she? Opening the door, she stepped through.

atmosphere at this point in time that we could be stuck here forever trying

A guard was inside, but the officer of the day waved him away. to find out which one we'd seen.'

Lieutenant Vincente was the OD on duty, and he gave Davison a

'What's that supposed to mean?' Benny asked.

querying look. 'Hi Marion, come to see where the real work happens?'

'Well, people in this era were always seeing UFOs, and usually

'Sort of,' Davison replied after the obligatory chuckle at the standard considering them alien spaceships, but,' he added pointedly, 'even in the joke. 'I thought I'd pick your brains for a few quotes about the afternoon's unexplained cases, you have historians from the future; ball lightning; a excitement.'

rather odd bunch of Sidhe who inhabit the upper dimensions of Earth's

Vincente frowned. 'What excitement?'

timeline... the list is endless. Either way, it's all a recorded part of Earth

'Well, the flying disc,' Davison prompted with a determined

history, and exactly the sort of thing you'd expect to see in this time seriousness.

period.'

'Flying disc?' Vincente looked askance at her. 'What are you talking

Benny wasn't born yesterday, however - or tomorrow, for that matter -

about?'

and grinned slowly. 'That's why you really brought us here, isn't it? So you

'Wait a minute.' Davison's voice threatened to break into a laugh. could see for yourself what these things looked like.'

Surely, she thought, Vincente was trying to pull a fast one on her. 'You've

'Curiosity is a virtue in the traveller,' he answered cheerily. 'Otherwise

been on duty since sixteen hundred, right?'

what's be the point in going anywhere?'

'Yeah.'

Far above, high in the desert, two luminescent discs banked off

'So you must have been here fifteen minutes later, when the missile towards Holloman and the Proving Grounds.

blew up and the two Sabres were sent up after the flying disc that...' She

trailed off as Vincente looked blankly at her.

The last copy of Finney's final report of the day's events fell into his out-

'Someone must be fooling with you, Marion; there's been no scramble tray, and was quickly crowned with a heavy paperweight. Finney studied today.'

the paperweight thoughtfully; it consisted of a model Dakota mounted on

For a moment, Davison considered asking one of the others in the a metal support which had double knuckle-like metal hinges, the whole tower, but a quick glance confirmed that they looked as surprised and assembly being glued into a perspex block. Any of the mechanics on the baffled as Vincente. Davison hadn't particularly expected to be told base would have been able to identify the hinged metal as a throttle-cable anything as such, considering the security classification, but there should support, the model indicating that it was from a Dakota, but to Finney it at least have been a 'no comment'. 'I guess you're right,' she said slowly, was much more. It was the reason he was now in a desk job, for one and backed towards the door. 'Somebody must be jerking me around. thing, as well as being the reason why he now had to stretch out his stiff Sorry to bother you.'

leg to ease its ache.

'Any time,' Vincente replied in a bemused tone.

Etched into the perspex block, as indelibly as it was etched into the

Leaving the tower, Davison paused outside. How could the crew have core of Finney's being, was the date 'December 7th, 1950'. Occasionally, failed to notice what had happened? They certainly weren't good enough someone would ask why that date was inscribed on it, but only a few field actors for this to be a simple clamming-up. This, she was sure, was surgeons and some personnel staff knew the answer. Finney, of course, something worth looking into.

couldn't forget. It was the date on which the cable support had been removed from his thigh after being blown almost clean through it by a

A pair of jets hurtled overhead as the Doctor, Ace, and Benny all left the cannon-shell in the skies over the Chosin Reservoir.

Rib Room. 'More aerial activity, obviously,' the Doctor said with a nod.

Leaning back in his chair, and absently trying to rub away the ache in

'The morning papers should be full of all sorts of amusing stories. We can his thigh, he reflected that he should have been more careful going up the pick some up on our way to this pueblo of yours, Benny.' His head tower steps that afternoon.

snapped round as Ace shuddered involuntarily, before looking round with

He opened his eyes and immediately wished he hadn't, since the

circular lampshade hanging above was a stinging reminder of both the most of the time anyway. You said we're "probably" going to investigate test failure and the subsequent death of the fighter pilot. Worst of all, this that disc?'

was the third successive Atlas test failure. He could already hear his

'Yes.' He straightened as a burst of rock and roll came from the radio,

superiors at the Pentagon calling for his head. He felt that they would then turned the volume down.

most likely invalid him out of the service, as they had barely held back

'Why do I get the feeling that it's the reason why we're really here?

from doing before. 'And probably using you as the excuse,' he whispered And, please, don't go on about the different types of flying objects.' Do I to the paperweight.

get that feeling because he always has an ulterior motive, she

added

Pulling himself together, he wondered what deductions Kreer had mentally.

made after his investigations. He glared across at the chair opposite, as if

The Doctor stood silently for a moment, then leaned thoughtfully

he could materialize his special scientific adviser by sheer force of against the sideboard. 'The TARDIS is an old model, you know, dating willpower. 'What's the point in having a scientific adviser who's never back to the time when Time Lord engineers were a little more...

around to advise?' he grumbled to himself. The telephone rang then, the innovative,' he went on, with a ghost of a smile. 'They were always trying noise jarring him into alertness. 'Yes,' he snapped when he had lifted the new circuit combinations and new functions, with no idea how they'd work receiver.

- if at all - but always striving to add new refinements.' He smiled faintly,

'Lieutenant Vincente, at the tower. We have a Code Blue.'

looking into empty space; though not, Benny suspected, empty time.

'The disc's back?'

'She's a very sensitive old girl, you see, and now and again she picks up

'Two of them, sir. They're buzzing the military reservation south of us.'

things I'd miss. Somehow I got the feeling that she was trying to bring us

'Has Kreer been notified?'

to this time and place, and I want - I have to see why.'

'We've put the word out for him, if that's what you mean.'

'So the TARDIS is as curious as you?'

'Red alert! Ready a flight of Sabres; half the duty squadron, but don't

'Well,' he shrugged, 'we are symbiotically linked, so there's bound to be

scramble them yet. I won't risk any more men for an empty stretch of a certain amount of growing together in terms of mental processes.'

bombed-out desert. I expect those dozen planes to be waiting on the

'Oh,' Benny answered, and sipped the beer she'd filled her latest glass

runway by the time I reach you.' Not waiting for an acknowledgement, with. She felt it best not to mention that the best known parallel for this Finney slammed the phone down and rushed

out, the alert sirens ringing sort of behaviour among humans was between married couples. A surreal in his ears.

image of the Doctor and the TARDIS in front of a church altar flashed

before her eyes, and she had to bite her lip to keep her face straight.

While Ace was off exploring the length and breadth of the locked-up When she looked up again, he had vanished.

motel, Benny relaxed on a couch in the communal lounge while the A few moments later, Ace came in. 'Where did you put the rest of that?'

Doctor tried to tune in a radio set that was on the sideboard. 'What she asked, pointing at the drink in Benny's hand.

happened to the previous owners of this place?' she asked finally.

'In the smallest fridge.'

'The husband was killed in Korea, and the wife went back to her

'Right.' Ace nodded, and departed after the Doctor.

parents.'

'Did you leave that in the note as well?' She had now travelled with the Watching the Sabres taxiing into position out on the runway, Finney felt a Doctor long enough to know that his explanations were often facetious - guilty pang of relief that he was safely ensconced in the control tower.

though not often the ones she might have preferred that way.

'Bearing to target?'

'Not exactly. I rendered certain medical assistance at Chosin and

'Bearing one-seven-zero, altitude Angels-two-zero, thirty miles

Panmunjom. With varying degrees of success,' he added, as a shadow downrange,' Vincente replied. 'They're still together, sir; shall I launch a passed across his face.

surface-to-air?'

Benny nodded understandingly. 'That's why you prefer not to delve into

'After what happened to the Atlas? Missile are hardly going to be useful

medical matters unless it's absolutely vital, isn't it?'

against them. Scramble the fighters - this time they can watch each

'Is it?'

other's backs. If the bogeys should split up, six aircraft are to engage

'May I ask how all this came about, then?'

each one.'

'You may ask,' he said dryly.

'Yes sir.'

'Thanks, but no thanks; my head feels like M.C. Escher's waste bin

* * *

Kreer padded silently across the dispersal area between the engineering

'Even in a desert?'

workshops and the tower, watching impassively as the first pair of F-86s

'Well, there *was* a worried-looking brass monkey at the front door a

powered along the runway and screamed into the night air. Pausing in minute ago, asking if we had a soldering iron handy.'

mid-step, Kreer looked back up at the diminishing navigation lights of the

'No clouds or moisture to keep in the day's heat,' the Doctor went on

fighters. 'How can he hope to conduct an aerial combat in the dark?' he absently. 'I never did like deserts much; not since I was in the Gobi, murmured to himself. His eyes widened with a snarl as a thought struck anyway.'

him. 'Oh no...' Breaking into an enraged run, he resumed his course for

'What are you really watching for?' she asked in a more serious, and -

the tower.

though she would neither admit to, nor recognize it herself - authoritative

If I'm too late, he thought, I'll disembowel Finney with-He forced the tone. To her surprise, he looked round at her.

feelings down. It wasn't time for that yet.

'Whatever I might see.' He glanced skywards again with a concerned

expression. 'By the pricking of my thumbs...'

Having found a glass and a selection of beers, Ace made to return to the

'Something wicked this way comes?' Ace couldn't help but look up

lounge and rejoin Benny.

suspiciously. 'I know what you mean. I keep getting this feeling, like I can

Almost despite herself, however, she looked out at the low bulge in the smell something nasty and can't figure out what it is.'

ground beyond the kitchen window. The earthwork marked the location of

'That's more or less it. I often get that feeling when there are Daleks

a half-built fall-out shelter which extended from the main building.

Wryly, around.'

Ace wondered just how much difference its walls would make to the

'Do you think there are?' Ace asked in a businesslike tone. Though

occupants. She personally had no objection to being protected by good concerned about the effect they had on local populations, she half-hoped defences, be it a deflector shield, woven kevlar fibres, or bonded there were some Daleks in the vicinity. She understood Daleks.

polycarbide armour; but she felt that - given the choice - she would

'No, not at all. I've felt it in many other situations,' he explained. 'On

probably have forsaken the fall-out shelter. After all, she wondered Segonax, for example.'

blackly, who wants to survive the first blast just long enough to die of

Reminded of the nightmarish events at the Psychic Circus on

multiple cancers over the following few weeks? She turned away from the Segonax, Ace grimaced, most assuredly unreassured, and went back into window, sneering inwardly at her preoccupation with death and the kitchen.

destruction, which seemed to have become an occupational hazard.

It was all academic in any case, Ace reminded herself. Certainly there Kreer burst into the tower control room, eyes blazing. 'Do not use the new had been no nuclear exchange before she had left Earth in 1986, and her phased-frequency radar array!' he thundered.

visits since had shown no sign of any such devastation either.

'And why shouldn't I?' Finney demanded in an offended tone from the

She paused, her hand on the fridge door, and looked out with the window. 'Or have you suddenly been placed in command?' he asked feeling that she had overlooked something. Peering out, she stepped pointedly.

closer to the window, now realizing what it was that had so nearly

'Sorry, sir,' Kreer corrected himself smoothly, the hesitation barely escaped her attention.

noticeable. 'The new array hasn't been properly tested yet-'

Standing silently at the far end of the incomplete shelter, head cocked

'Then it'll be tested now. Vincente, keep the pilots updated with the

to watch the sky with an unreadable air, the Doctor stood like a pale ghost vectors from the new array.' Finney turned away as Kreer

looked at his watching over an ancient longbarrow under the drifting moon. Curious, back with burning eyes.

Ace went to the door and out into the chill night air, wishing she had

brought her duster out from her room. 'Stargazing?' she suggested.

The Doctor turned, head cocked in a listening position, as a rising whine

'Statistically, the hours from eleven p.m. to one a.m. are the ones in pierced the air. Looking up impassively, he barely had time to blink as two which you're most likely to see unidentified flying objects.'

bright circular forms flashed overhead, rapidly vanishing into the night. A

'Really?' She shrugged. 'You're not even wearing an anorak.'

few seconds later, a number of dully metallic jet fighters hurtled bast in

'Does it make a difference?' he asked, turning slightly towards her. She hot pursuit with an angry roar.

noted that his eyes were still tilted upwards nonetheless.

Tapping his fingers on the handle of his umbrella for a moment, the

'Absolutely, they're standard equipment for trainspotters, UFO—

Doctor stepped around the mound of the half-built shelter and returned to

spotters, fans of-'

the motel.

In the distance, something flashed bright among the stars.

called up an image of the other skiff in the holosphere. Its glow sparking

randomly, it hurtled downwards. 'Contact with *Kron* lost,' Xeno was Xeno, commanding the skiff *Laz'Ar*, kept a close eye on the holosphere's informed.

computer-enhanced images of the pursuing fighters. 'Match their leader's

Finally, the *Kron* flared up once and vanished. 'Notify the captain on

velocity,' he told his pilot, 'but do not allow them to close.'

R'Shal that one skiff has been lost. Helm; current course, best speed until

'As you command,' the woman acknowledged, her cheekbones looking we're out of the interference field.'

cadaverous under the blue lighting. 'If we increase power output by a

further five percent, we will be cloaked.'

His full, hard face eerily lit by the green glow from the radar screen, Kreer

'Maintain current output until all operational parameters and scowled as the traces unmarked by transponder codes vanished. 'They've manoeuvring capabilities of the Earth aircraft have been transmitted to gone, Colonel,' he informed Finney.

R'Shal.'

'I think one of them might have gone down,' Vincente reported from his

'As you-' She broke off as a low-pitched alarm hummed sonorously. screen. 'The other definitely got away, though.'

'Alert! Six further aircraft in sensor range; three bearing zero-one-five Finney looked down at Vincente's screen, mulling over that possibility.

mark zero-two-four, the remainder bearing three-two-zero mark three—

His attention so distracted, he failed to notice Kreer give Vincente's back

three-five! All units on intercept course.'

an unpleasant, predatory look. 'Try and work out where,' he ordered.

'Flag notation to telemetry of aircraft performance; individual actions When he turned round, Kreer had disappeared.

indicate two-dimensional thinking, but group strategy shows evidence of

limited three-dimensional consideration.'

Shadow watched with cool dispassion as the greasers, jocks, and other

'Confirmed,' the crewman at the communications console announced. arcanely named youths cavorted in the night air, unconsciously evoking

'Limits of design tolerances and performance now noted and logged. All memories of the ritual dances performed by local tribes long before the data uplinked to tactical database aboard *R'Shal*.'

forefathers of these people had arrived in the region.

'Send to skiff *Kron*: new course; one-one-zero mark zero-nine-zero.

She sat comfortably in a dim corner across the road from the youths,

Engage graviton drive at will.'

serenely watching the display. Why the youths played with such abandon

'Sending.'

before even getting their prey in sight, she didn't understand, but she was

'Humans in firing range,' the helm reported. 'Flight leaders are arming unconcerned. Her partner in the hunt seemed to know why they behaved weapons; now firing. Multiple projectile impacts on outer hull - no as they did, and his satisfaction at the way the proceedings were going damage.' The atmosphere in the ship remained completely calm, with was echoed in herself. One of the immature hunters was making some neither sound nor motion to indicate that the vessel was either in motion sort of staccato call in the direction of a tall metal pole at their prey's lair, or under attack.

but the sounds were unmusical and meaningless to her.

'Engage graviton drive.'

There seemed to be some brief argument between two of the youths,

as one wearing a dark brown leather jacket gestured impatiently towards

The two glowing discs dulled like doused fires, their clean-lined edges the house beyond, and the plaid-jacketed boy with him bulled away, swimming as the moonlight was bent around them by the gravitational shaking his head. Shoving him aside, to the amusement of the others -

fields produced by their drive systems.

and to that of Shadow's partner, she felt - the leather-clad youth lit a rag

They swam back into focus without warning, swooping down erratically which was stuffed into a bottle. Drawing his arm back, he hurled it through over the desertscape.

the window of the house.

A flash of flame and heat burst out, which the other youthes appeared

Deep blue emergency lights pulsed in the interior of the *Laz'Ar* as the ship to take as a signal of some kind, hurling further bottles with gleeful cries.

juddered like an aircraft passing through turbulence. 'Report!' Xeno Throughout the house, bursts of flame flared up and licked hungrily

snapped.

around the walls. Their appearance was as sudden and as damning as

'Phased magnetic radiation of some kind is causing untelemetred the appearance of any summoned demon of ancient myth. The jeers and gravimetric interference in the drive field.'

laughter of the atavistic youths overran the clear air more chillingly than

'Reduce power to standard! Disengage graviton drive!'

the buzzing of a locust swarm.

All too aware that the same problem would be affecting the *Kron*, Xeno

Abruptly, a clawed scream struck up from the interior of the blazing lair,

rising above the roar of the flames and crash of brittle glass to cut off

most of the laughter. Silhouetted by the increasingly furnace-like glow behind, a figure appeared at the door, clutching at the doorpost as wisps **Chapter 4**

of smoke curled from his clothes and hair.

Several of the youthes fled immediately, while a couple of others stood

indecisively to look for guidance. With a malicious laugh, the leather-clad The walls of the circular chamber were smooth, with inlaid panels that one stooped to pick up a rock. The boy with whom he had argued earlier may have been either decorative or functional, if Jack Siegel had been in lunged for him, trying to knock the stone from his grip, but he was quickly any fit state to look. Instead, however, his glazed eyes faced the felled by a blow to the temple. Without any further sound, he folded up phosphorescent ceiling unblinkingly.

and slumped in the middle of the road. Standing there, possibly scenting

Lying, like the rest of his family, naked on a clammy plastic bench, he

the crisp blood as Shadow did - *that* she could understand - he hurled the was completely unresponsive to the large coal-black eyes of the rock at the backlit figure, knocking him sprawling back into the inferno diminutive surgeon-major checking an instrument set in the headrest.

with a pained moan. With the rock he also hurled jeering cries which, Several other fragile three-foot hight beings busied themselves at the though Shadow didn't understand the words, were in a clearly venomous benches of the others, taking samples of skin, blood, and hair.

tone.

When a tone sounded from the headset, Surgeon-Major Ksal

As if fate had been awaiting this, the roof of the hallway suddenly fell disconnected a slim transparent tube from a piston-like arrangement on in, fire pouring down onto the recumbent figure like molten gold.

the underside of the headrest. With a faint sucking sound, a slim needle

The anguished moans stopped.

withdrew itself back into the piston. Holding the cylinder in whiplike In the distance, a scream of sirens grew quickly louder. The leather-fingers, Ksal carefully slotted it into a panel in the wall. Immediately, clad youth, now looking more like a startled bird, bolted off down the traceries of light rippled along its ebon surface, scrolling into strange street, leaving only a burning house and a body in the road.

forms. Ksal watched them impassively, then turned to his assistants.

As soon as he had gone, neighbours began to appear in their 'These humans are suitable. Conduct full processing, then give them the doorways, pointing to the metal pole and up at the sky.

neural inhibitor.' He turned back to the panel. 'Surgeon-Major Ksal to the

Shadow didn't stay to watch their reaction. She could feel her partner's bridge.'

amusement as clearly as she could scent the tang of blood and charred

'Bridge,' the captain's voice acknowledged. 'Report.'

flesh in her nostrils. The heat from the fire reminded her uncomfortably of

'The humans are being processed now. They should be ready for

the heat of flames that had so nearly consumed her once before, but the transfer back to Earth by dawn.'

other presence in her mind was unaffected, the calmness quieting her

'Noted and logged.'

nerves. If she could read, she might have noticed the name Joseph Wiesniewski written on a charred-edged fragment of a *QST* magazine On the bridge, the captain looked up from the holosphere showing Ksal cover that blew past her in the light breeze.

and nodded towards Tzashan, who loomed over him to see the display. 'I

Instead, she turned and slipped silently down the street.

shall order the use of one of my S'Raph pilots,' the captain announced.

'The can switch to emergency manoeuvring on low power, if the phased

radar array begins operating again and disables the skiffs' graviton drives.

A S'Raph can withstand pressures that would kill a Ph'Sor crew.'

'The human subjects must not be harmed. They are not designed to

withstand such acceleration and changes in inertia as you are,'

Tzashan
admonished. 'However, matters are in hand. The radar array will be disabled within the hour.'
A dark figure shuffled carefully through the crawlspace under the ground
floor of the control tower, pressing tentatively upwards every few feet.
After a few moments, a small access panel popped open and a hand
slipped through to feel around for a set of cables that ran above it. Pulling

himself up, the intruder found himself in the workings of an electronic cases by way of explanation.
cabinet of some kind. Working swiftly, even though there was no light at
'You wouldn't know,' Jack muttered through a raw throat.
all to see by, he cut through several of the cables.
'Don't be too sure; I once had one where all my old foes chased me
Pulling a small box from a pocket, the intruder quickly connected it to round a soap opera. You must have had a very busy night,' he went on the severed cables and flicked a small switch on it. A tiny LED blinked without changing his cheerful tone.
softly, and the intruder slid back down through the panel, resisting the
Fighting against an onrush of bafflement, Jack stood, clutching at the
urge to laugh aloud.
doorpost as the world swam woozily. 'I wish I knew,' he groaned.
He set the dial on an identical box, and pocketed it. 'For when the
'I doubt that. Don't worry; the effect will soon wear off.'
interference will be useful,' he murmured to himself.
'What effect?'
'Well, it's difficult to be sure, but at an educated guess I'd say you've all
Night, as is the way of things on most worlds, gave way to dawn the sun been hit with multiple blasts from a phased energy weapon on a heavy painting the desertscape with broad strokes of burnished gold. Molten stun setting.'
sunlight gave the sky a yellow hue, the farmhouse and its associated
'What the hell is a phased...?' Jack staggered into the house and outbuildings silhouetted against a sheet of gold as a new but dusty collapsed into his favourite chair, his head pounding. The strange little

Plymouth convertible bumped along the road that bordered the open man followed, the two women leading the others slowly into the lounge.

ground before the house.

'Nothing to worry about: just something that hasn't been invented yet.

'Stop the car,' the Doctor snapped suddenly. Ace did so, looking round You know, your nightmare could be a result of concussion,' the stranger to see him staring across at the farmhouse. 'Look,' he told the women, theorized. 'Let's have a look.' Before Jack could gather his wits enough to pointing with his umbrella. Benny followed the direction and was shocked protest, the man had pulled his head forward. A gentle pressure prompted to see two men lying slumped in front of an open door. 'There's a gate,' a dull yet stinging pain in the side of his skull. 'Nothing serious. Odd, the Doctor added. 'Take us in.'

though: that wasn't where you put your hand when you woke up.'

Ace guided the car through the wide wooden gate and down the track

'I've got a crick in my neck, that's all. Are you a doctor?'

that led to the porch. Benny and the Doctor leapt out almost before she'd

'No, I'm *the* Doctor.'

stopped the vehicle. The Doctor dropped to his knees to check the Jack could have sworn he heard the capital letter. 'Who are you nearest man's pulse. 'This one's alive, at least.' He rolled the unconscious people?' he finally blurted. 'What are you doing on my farm?'

man over, looking, Benny was sure, for signs of injury.

'My friend Benny over there,' the Doctor pointed at the woman with the

Meanwhile, Ace had checked the second body. 'This one's alive as jeans and brown hat, 'is an archaeologist. The young lady in the coat is well, but I don't see any wounds.'

Ace. We were on our way to visit an old pueblo when we saw you lying

Benny stepped around them and pushed open the front door, which out there, so we came to help.'

was ajar. The sight made her feel faintly sick. 'There are more in here -

Jack nodded understandingly. 'Mighty kind of you. Not many people

women and kids.'

would do that these days. Are you all archaeologists?'

'Wake them up,' the Doctor told her, gently slapping the face of his

'No we're...' the Doctor paused as he moved over to check the rest of

patient. 'It's half past cockcrow and there's work to be done.'

the family. 'Troubleshooters, if you like.'

'Troubleshooters?'

The dark oval that had such a grip on Jack's mind slowly resolved itself

'Well, everywhere I go, I seem to find trouble,' the Doctor explained

into the shade of the unlit bulb over the porch. Putting a trembling hand to with a grin.

the back of his neck, where an itch was persistently gnawing at him, he

'And I shoot it,' Ace added, with a lopsided smile of her own.

blinked away the fuzziness of sleep with a groan.

Although the dusty porch of his own house was totally familiar, he Finney looked about the tabletop-flat environment as he went into the didn't recognize the short man who was peering into his bleary eyes from central radar room in the main building under the control tower. There under the sagging brim of a white fedora. Two women were busy gently were far more radar displays here, with desks around the edges of the waking the rest of the family. 'If you were sleep-walking, it must have room. The centre of the floorspace was taken up with a large tabletop been quite a nightmare,' the man opined in a noticeable Scottish accent. relief map of the surrounding hundred square miles. A long wall of He gestured towards the battered front door and some spent cartridge plexiglass, like a larger brother of the one in the launch control bunker, partitioned the radar controls from the tabletop map.

the ranking AFOSI representative.'

Vincente was at the plexiglass wall, marking off distances with a pair of

'I'm well aware of your section's claim on any skyfalls for Project dividers. Finney absently thought that Vincente looked as if he hadn't Moondust,' Finney said testily. If truth be told, not only did he dislike Kreer slept since last night. With a guilty start, the colonel realized that it was but he would have given anything for a look at the disc that could run probably true, and that Vincente had been working down here since his rings around his missiles so well. 'Let's just find out if the damn thing duty shift ended at midnight. Approaching, he motioned to Vincente to actually still exists first,' he recommended.

remain at ease.

'Of course,' Kreer smiled, leaving the room.

'What have you got, Carl?' he asked, indicating the ink-marked

Finney was anything but a stickler for discipline, though he was aware

transparent surface.

of the need for it, but something about Kreer's informality made him want

'I've been using the radar tapes from last night; running them through a to clap the AFOSI officer in irons.

test cycle. I think we can say for sure that one of the discs definitely came

down east of here. Whether it soft-landed, or was totally blown away, I 'You saw two discs,' the Doctor was saying, 'and then what?'

can't tell.'

'I don't remember.' Jack shrugged. He frowned in concentration, trying

'How specific can you be as to the location?'

to recall what had happened and why he had been lying outside.

'Not very - once it dropped below a hundred feet it was gone; the signal Something rose up from the back of his mind, urging him that some things was none too clear for a while before that.' He put down the dividers and were best left forgotten. His mouth felt dry, and he seemed to have a sour picked up a pointer, moving to the tabletop map. 'The best I can say for taste in it.

certain is that it came down in these foothills,' Vincente explained,

'Is something wrong?'

pointing to the western edge of the bulge that marked the Sacramento

'Just a rotten taste in my mouth.'

Mountains.

'Hmm, you should have remembered to bru-' The Doctor looked at him

'That's a certainty, what would be your best guess?' If nothing else, sideways. 'Like lemonade with salt in it instead of sugar, by any chance?'

Finney valued the fact that his men were thinking individuals with ideas of

Jack though for a moment. It did seem to have a bitter, lemon-ish tang.

their own. Another item on which he disagreed with the other military 'You could put it that way, I suppose.'

members of his family.

'I should have known,' the Doctor said, half to himself. He looked over

'That's a tough one,' Vincente smiled, 'but if pushed...' He moved the at the others as if weighing something up. 'Rick, isn't it?' the

Doctor asked tip of the pointer in a circular motion over an area of ground between the the third man in the room. Rick nodded. 'The children will probably be two small settlements of High Rolls and Cloudcroft. 'Somewhere in here.'

tired and frightened, so I suggest you put them to bed. Once they're Finney looked at the area in silence for a moment, wondering how settled, take Donna and Mary into the kitchen and get something to eat.'

reliable he could treat the guess. 'About twenty miles from here... All right,

'Go ahead, Rick,' Jack nodded. He was puzzled and apprehensive, but

even if you're off a little we can still search outwards from High Rolls the authority in the Doctor's tone was unmistakable.

park-'

'Ace, Benny, this might be important.' Ace remained by the door to

'An excellent idea,' Kreer's voice agreed from the doorway. The major make sure they weren't disturbed, but Benny approached, glancing walked around the table, his hands clasped in front of him, pursing his lips through the window as a helicopter clattered past somewhere in the as he studied the map. 'Of course, if anyone saw it, they will have to be middle-distance.

brought in for debriefing.'

Jack began to wonder just what he had let himself in for by leaving

'We'll give them the usual talk,' Finney acknowledged. 'If you're so himself along in the room with these strangers. Nervously he looked keen to be involved with this operation, you can go and order a pair of around for his rifle, but Ace had carefully replaced it in the empty slot in Dragonflies to those co-ordinates. By the time we get a quarantine team the gun rack. 'All right,' the Doctor said in a friendly tone, 'turn your head together they might be able to direct us to the site-ref.'

to the side.' Jack did so, and noticed out of the corner of his eye that the

'Consider it done,' Kreer said smoothly, turning away. He turned back. Doctor was craning round to look at the back of his head.

'There is one other thing,' he began, with a honeyed tone of reluctance.

A prod at the base of his neck produced an insistent itch.

'Under regulations AFM 190-4, all physical recoveries pertaining to

The Doctor reappeared before him. 'Pull your shirt up,' he commanded.

Unidentified Aerial Phenomena are to be forwarded to the S-Four

area at

Without really knowing why, Jack pulled the hem of his shirt up to his

Corman AFB as soon as possible. Such transfers are to be supervised by chest. To his surprise and astonishment, a red weal with a pinhead-sized spot of dried blood at the centre was plainly in evidence, about an inch The Doctor, his features a mask of concern, touched his finger to Jack's about his navel. 'Tissue sampling,' the Doctor murmured. Nodding grimly forehead. 'It's over. It's all over,' he murmured reassuringly. 'Now it's time to himself, he put his hands to Jack's temples. 'Listen to me,' he ordered. to sleep. Sleep, Jack Siegel, sleep...' Jack's face relaxed slowly and his

'Concentrate, and listen to me.'

head fell back onto the pillow. The Doctor stood up. 'He should sleep

Suddenly powerless to do anything else, Jack met the Doctor's gaze, normally now.'

and found himself falling into infinity.

Ace felt a weight lifted from her shoulders now that Jack was sleeping

'It is night,' the Doctor told him. 'Your wife and brother think there is normally. Benny looked a little uneasy but unimpressed. 'Hallucinations,'

someone on the roof...'

she suggested. 'An attack of night terrors?'

To Jack's surprise, it was true.

'I don't think so,' the Doctor disagreed. 'I think he just told us about a

very real event that happened to him last night. I believe he was abducted

Ace had seen the Doctor's hypnotic ability a number of times, and had to by aliens who took tissue samples from him. The marks are still there.'

admit that it was a useful technique. Nevertheless, it still made her feel

'What do we do now?' Ace asked, cutting straight to the quick.

somewhat uncomfortable to see him use it on someone. She wouldn't

'If they're only coming down at night, there's not a lot we can do at the

dream of using violence to uncover a story from an innocent bystander, moment.' He started towards the door. 'For now, we go and visit Benny's but she couldn't help feeling that there was something more honest about pueblo. Tonight we'll offer our services at

Holloman, and see if we catch the more physical ways of doing things than this raping of the soul, which the culprits. Get the car started, Ace. I'll go and fill the others in on what's could have dangerous and invisible side-effects.

happened. Well, mostly, anyway...'

Repressing a shudder, she watched from the doorway as the Doctor removed his hands from Jack's temples. 'Tell us it as it happens.'

Jack's head lolled on his shoulders as if his neck was broken, occasionally raising itself jerkily as if on strings. His teeth were gritted and

his lips drawn back from the gums with fear. 'Open the door,' he gasped

hoarsely, looking over his shoulder sightlessly.

'Thank God,' he groaned, sagging in the chair with relief. 'Move it Rick-'

With a wide-eyes stare of horror, he looked down at his shoulder, then

quickly up at a point above his face. 'Holy Christ,' he moaned, his fingers

twitching spasmodically. 'Let me go!'

'What is it?' the Doctor hissed. 'What has a hold of you?'

'Some sort of shape... Rick? Mary, where are...'

'Describe the shape.'

'Small, grey... I don't want to see! There's a door. Lights inside...

metal.' He snorted and gagged. 'What is that smell? Cleaning flui...

ammonia. More shapes pushing me... I don't want to... to... It's a table. I'm

on a table; my clothes, where? I can't move.' His voice began to rise.

'Something above me... Oh, shit, no! Needle, with machinery at the far

end. It's longer than my hand! Digging into my stomach!' he screeched.

'Who? Who is doing this?'

'I can't! I mustn't see!'

'You must!'

'Not like us,' Jack gasped, through gritted teeth. 'Dead skin, but their

eyes... No! Mustn't see their black eyes,' he gasped painfully. 'Oh jeez,

the eyes are pure black, and I ain't hypnotized any more, Doc,' he finished, drawing in shuddery breaths.

Aghast, Ace let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Three long hangars stood out at the lake; white-roofed, they blended in
with it from the air. A large tower-mounted parabolic dish, not unlike a

small radio-telescope, stood incongruously at the north end of the complex.

A thickset-bulldog of a man, Major-General Hugh Nyby sat with his

The Plymouth convertible rumbled solidly along the dirt road, its huge back to the window overlooking the dish. The rest of the room, like the silver grille remaining obstinately gleaming and chromed as vortices of rest of the base, was painted a pastel blue. Tossing envelopes into his dust trailed away from the impressive rear fins.

out-tray, he sorted through the day's influx of mail until he found the The wind curling around the gently curved windscreen gave the time dispatch which he had been waiting for. His dark and slablike hands travellers a much-needed respite from the dry heat. While Ace guided the opened the envelope with surprising precision to gain access to the car along the bumpy road into the foothills, the Doctor squinted photostat sheets within.

suspiciously up at the sky. Benny reclined along the back seat, trying to

He had tried to tell himself that his interest in the officer whose records

keep her hat on her head where it belonged.

he had requested from Washington was merely a part of his general The countryside that they passed was something of a camouflage random sampling of loyalties. Senator Joe McCarthy had paved the way, pattern, with a surprisingly large amount of green scattered around in the and it was up to those like himself to heed the senator's warnings in order form of shrubs and bushed, though the beige of the desert remained to protect the American way of life, he felt.

predominant. Benny had half expected to feel like she was in a brick

He wasn't sure what he had been expecting to find, but perhaps he

furnace, but there was a fresh smell to the air that was almost spicy. It had suspected there might be some inconsistency with the records in the almost took her mind off the parched earth, in fact.

base's files. It took only the briefest of glances, however, to see that this

'What the smeg is that?' Ace suddenly said, bringing Benny out of her was not the case. The records gave a perfectly ordinary account of the reverie. She looked around and saw a faint haze in the air to the

left. service history of a mid-ranking officer. Wishing they had eased his Though not exactly a column of smoke, it was nevertheless too localized discomfort, Nyby tossed the sheets aside.

and opaque to be a simple heat haze.

The general knew, of course, what had sparked his concerns. Thirty

'Looks like the after-effects of a smoke column,' the Doctor answered, years of service had granted him an instinct for spotting the waffle of voicing Benny's suspicion.

military bureaucracy, though it also left him with an unwashed feeling

'Could be. I assume you'll want to take a look.'

every time he felt it necessary to challenge that bureaucracy. More

'Of course,' the Doctor answered, as if the question was totally specifically, as the commander of a research base he had seen enough ridiculous. 'It may be a crash of some kind; something may need help.'

oddly worded orders for black-budget programmes to know when

'Right. You mean someone, don't you?'

something wasn't quite proper.

'Do I?' He shrugged. 'Probably.'

The orders that Major Kreer had presented upon his arrival at Corman

The foothills rose and fell ahead of the car as Ace drove off the road back in May had had a vagueness about them that made Nyby's teeth and onto the gritty desert floor. The car bumped, and some metallic itch. That had been bad enough, but when the equipment for Projects spangs started coming from somewhere underneath as small stones were Snowbird and Moondust had begun to arrive, his base had started bounced up by the wheels. 'They're not going to like this one little bit,' Ace becoming ever more strange to him. And for when Snowbird itself had muttered, wincing with each spanging noise.

turned up...

'I told you, Ace; I don't want to know,' the Doctor reminded her.

If only Snowbird wasn't so important to the Pentagon, he thought, an

The rough hills stared back silently.

investigation would quickly clear up the problem with Kreer - or prove his

innocence and loyalty.

Jagged mountains surrounded Corman AFB with outflung arms, leaving

Kreer, and his staff...

only a narrow gap through which a runway stretched out across the edge

of a dry lake that gleamed whitely under the Nevada sun. Unlike the small Ace trotted on ahead of the Doctor and Benny with the first-aid case, town that was formed of Holloman's scattered buildings, the flat-topped kicking up little puffs of dust as she moved up the steep track from the complexes of Corman were all grafted onto the mountainsides at ground car. Adrenalin preventing any sense of fatigue despite the heat of the day, level; spy-planes, therefore, saw what they thought were natural outcrops.

she topped the rise and looked down towards the source of the faint cloud

of haze.

seemingly drained of oxygen.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

'Some sort of scout-ship by the look of it.'

The Doctor and Benny arrived a few seconds later, Benny pausing to

'Amazing. You've been talking to Holmes and Watson again, haven't

fan herself with her hat, and joined Ace in surveying the area before them.

you? I'm not blind; I meant what species flies things like that?'

Spread out below the soft sandstone cliff, a bone-dry arroyo

'Impossible to tell,' he said, ignoring her irritated sarcasm. 'That's a

meandered across the desert, a few small shrubs growing in its basin. very generic design structure. If I could get a closer look...'

Bisecting the arroyo, a churned furrow of desert soil several yards wide

'Why is it still so hot?' Ace broke in. 'If it came down last night, it should

speared towards the low cliff like an arrow, a scattering of different tones have cooled by now.'

of dust and earth surrounding it like the foam of a ship's wake.

'Its drive system may be still running. Since it obviously can't move, the

At the base of the cliff under their feet, shimmering in the murky and energy is being radiated off as heat.' The Doctor gave the disc a quizzical acrid haze rising from its smouldering hull, the source of the disturbance look. 'It's obviously just a short-range scout, though. It can't be long before lay.

its fuel runs out.'

Tilted at almost forty-five degrees, half of it buried under a pile of dirt

'Any danger of explosion?'

and smashed sandstone, a scarred and blackened disc of metal about

'I shouldn't think so. It must have been a lot hotter last night, so I would

thirty feet across was embedded in the desert floor. A miasma of tiny imagine it would have gone critical then if it was going to at all. Wouldn't glittering pieces of wreckage surrounded it like a halo.

you?'

For a moment none of them could speak, until the Doctor pointed

'If you say so.'

grimly downwards. 'Whoever or whatever they are,' he said in a

The distant rumble of traffic had now grown louder and dust was businesslike tone, 'they may still need help.'

beginning to fill the air to a greater extent than the pot-pourri scent of

'They may just be about to get it - in spades,' Benny warned, pointing grasses or the stench of burning. The trio started jogging away from the out a rising trail of dust from a distant road. Whatever the vehicles were, disc, but it was too late and the vehicles were upon them.

they were ignoring the turning in the road and making straight across

A jeep full of air police cut across their path, drawing to a halt in front of

country towards the disc.

them. Even as the air police were setting foot on the ground, two trucks

'The helicopter we heard must have vectored them onto it,' Ace had passed by and drawn up before the disc. A boxy M59 APC rumbled suggested.

past, churning up scorched earth as it took up position near the disc.

'Never mind them,' the Doctor urged. 'Come on.' He began scrambling Benny glared in open hostility at the air police as they approached. 'Are cautiously down a narrow mule-track that lined the face of the bluff.

we under arrest?' she demanded.

Ace and Benny followed, sending small rocks tumbling down with trails

'Not yet,' a voice announced behind them, and they turned to find a

of dust. The mule-track doubled back on itself a couple of times, and lieutenant approaching them from the M59. The name on his chest read reached the ground some distance to one side of the disc,

thus sparing 'E. Wood'. 'You will have to be debriefed on what you've witnessed here.'

them the worst of the rising heat. Ace and Benny still had to fan He looked at her suspiciously. 'You're not American?'

themselves with their hats, though the Doctor seemed characteristically

'Does it show?'

unaffected.

'Colonel Finney will want to question you. Sergeant, take these three

A strange and acrid metallic scent choked the air as they approached back to Holloman, and keep them under guard until the colonel or Major the disc, and they could see that small fires were still burning in places Kreer can see them.'

among the blackened juniper bushes and buffalo grass. Fortunately the

air was still, and the fires were dying rather than spreading.

In a drab ante-room decorated with aircraft-recognition charts and

The disc itself rippled and wavered in the heat, and hollow groans and security posters, the Doctor checked his pocket-watch as several figures popping sounds emanated from it. The Doctor stopped, taking a few steps passed by on the other side of the frosted windows, then gave the wall-back, and Benny soon discovered why. As she got within a few yards of mounted payphone a thoughtful glance. Ace leaned at the side of the the disc, the heat became so intense that she felt so sluggish she closed door, looking daggers at the backs of the two guards stationed doubted shoe would be able to remain standing upright. Nausea washing outside and empathizing with Benny as the archaeologist paced irritably over her in waves like those of the heat haze, she withdrew to where Ace around the magazine-laden table. A movement drew Ace's attention, and stood with the Doctor. 'What the hell is is?' she gasped, the air thick yet she turned to see the Doctor move decisively towards the phone. 'Who are you thinking of calling?'

a long night with several airspace violation alerts and now, when he

'Hmm?' He looked up from sorting through a variety of currencies. He needed sleep more than anything, the local authorities were on to him seemed to have money for every occasion, from wooden groats to the constantly, demanding to know what had crashed near High Rolls. At the occasional twenty-narg note. 'I thought it would be useful if we could get a moment, he couldn't care less if the entire Red Army came marching friend to give us some references.'

down the street, so long as they brought a bed with them.

'Wonderful idea,' Ace commented. 'This is a military base, with

Sergeant Montoya popped his head round the door as Finney finally

security. They're not going to let you just phone out.'

managed to spare some time for a strong coffee. 'Excuse me, sir,' he

'We're allowed one phone call by law, or so I believe. Besides, I have a began deferentially.

few tricks.' He transferred a few suitable coins to his hand and dumped

'What is it, Sergeant?'

the rest back into his pocket. 'So much for security,' he commented,

'The locals from High Rolls area are all in the main drill hall, but we've

tapping the padlock over the phone. Brandishing his alternative self's got three non-American civilians who were at the crash site itself. They're sonic screwdriver, recovered from a world in which Homo Reptilicus had under guard in the visitors' waiting room. Shall I bring them in?'

destroyed humanity, he triggered it at the lock. It dropped away from the

Before Finney could react, the telephone rang. 'Finney, Project

phone, and the Doctor lifted the handset.

Javelin.' His lined face visibly paled. 'Yes sir, that is correct...' His eyes

As he dialled, Benny threw Ace a questioning look. Ace could only widened. 'Yes sir, I understand.' He put the phone down, forgetting that wish she was able to answer.

the sergeant was even there.

The Doctor smiled relievedly, proving to Ace that the call had been

'Shall I send the civilians in?' Montoya reminded him after a moment.

answered. 'Ah, Allen; glad I caught you at home. It's the Doctor here - you

'No,' Finney said grimly. 'I'll go out to them. I want to get away from this

remember, I helped out with all that trouble over at Santa Mira last damn phone for a while,' he added with feeling.

year...?' There was a pause as he evidently listened to some response.

'Yes, well, I've had a face-lift or three...'

A number of farmers lounged in folding chairs around the beige briefing

room, looking uncomfortable and concerned. Jack Siegel didn't appreciate

Stoker crouched amid the men sitting on the narrow benches of the

three—

the nervousness that had been inflicted on his family so soon after they

ton truck, which had just passed through the set of windowed gatehouses had been subjected to the previous night's terror. He knew that the air that guarded the entrance to Holloman. Each of them had violet eyes force boys were only doing their job, but keeping them locked up here peering out from under the helmet rims which hid their fringes of blond wasn't right.

hair. 'You,' he began, speaking to the men on one side, 'will go to the

He had been letting his anger simmer and stew until it reached the

nuclear storage bunker at the south end of the complex. The requisition point when, as Stoker opened the door, it boiled over. Shoving him aside, papers you have been given will allow you to remove two warheads for Siegel burst from the room, determined to find the base commander.

transport. Load them onto this vehicle and then return to the Several other men were outside, all with strange weapons in their hands.

administration block, where the rest of us will be waiting.'

Something flitted into Jack's mind from the previous night. They held

'As you command,' they chorused. The truck slowed to a halt and the the same weapons as... as whatever it was had held. Screeching with men on the other side opened the tailgate and climbed out.

anger and fear, he thrust them aside before they could aim properly, and

Stoker jumped down after them and the truck moved away. They were ran for the main door.

left standing outside a simple prefabricated office structure of a dusty He burst free just as the stun beam hit him.

sandstone colour. 'The witnesses to the crash will be debriefed in the

He might have been consoled to know that several puzzled air

main briefing room. You all have your neural suppressors?'

policemen witnessed this, and ran to see what the commotion was.

The men nodded.

'Set them on maximum. The witnesses must have no memories that The time-travellers looked up as alarm bells started ringing on the other may provide incriminating evidence of our activities on this planet. A side of the olive drab wall. An officer rushed up to the two guards at the sustained treatment of three seconds will be sufficient to wipe the past door, and pushed them on ahead of him. 'Curious,' the

Doctor day's memories. If they resist, use disruptors - on light stun only.'

commented.

'They must have something more important to deal with,' Ace

John C. Finney was more tired than he could ever remember. It had been pondered aloud. 'I think I'll take a little look around.'

'There'll be people around,' the Doctor warned.

views on this matter.'

'They seem to be occupied. I've been on enough military bases to

'Well, as I said, I'm the Doctor; this is my friend Benny-'

know how to keep out of sight.' She smiled crookedly. 'Or to act as if I

'Professor Summerfield to you.'

own the place.' She slipped out of the door.

'And that wreckage certainly has nothing to do with your Atlas missile

'Very funny,' the Doctor mattered.

tests.'

Finney hastily suppressed an instinctive urge to step backwards. 'How

Everyone seemed to be running towards the prefabricated building could you know about Project Javelin?'

outside, so Ace felt it was logical to blend in with the crowd. She was

'Well, we saw the test yesterday, and what happened to it.'

nearly run over by a truck which screeched to a halt in front of the door.

'So I've been told. It's been an unusual week - our test is disrupted by

Two large crates were just visible in the back of it.

something unknown, which later crashes; and as if that wasn't enough,

Several bodies were sprawled in the dust and, as Ace watched, a I've been ordered by the Pentagon, at the behest of the CIA, to release harsh whine accompanied the collapse of the remaining men. Beyond the you and let you go about your business!' He knew it was wrong, but prone bodies, more whines came from within the doors. Dropping behind somehow he couldn't keep the distaste out of his voice when he thought a jeep in the row of parked vehicles before the doors, Ace checked the of the intelligence services poking their noses into his base.

charge remaining in her blaster. She couldn't let these shootings go

'Do you dislike taking orders so much that getting some angers you

like

without at least some attempt to stop the criminals. The shot men were that?' Benny asked pointedly.

owed that at least. She noticed a body lying in the floor of the jeep, and

'Finney turned on her coldly. 'Didn't you see all of yesterday's show?

stretched out a hand to feel for a pulse. There was one, though it was After downing the Atlas, our unknown friend then downed an F-86; sent it weak. 'Set on stun again.'

into a flat spin. We'll be damned lucky if we can find enough pieces of the

pilot to hold a decent funeral. There was a survivor, but he's under The Doctor looked around with a calculating expression as Finney sedation ready for a Section 8 discharge from the service on entered the waiting area with a faint limp, while Montoya took up station psychological grounds, due to shock. And now I have to let three CIA outside. 'Where are the guards?' Finney demanded.

spooks come in and take over the investigation.'

'I don't know, sir. I left them here with strict orders...'

'Sorry,' Benny said quietly.

'An officer took them away when the alarms started ringing,' the Doctor

'We truly are sorry about the death of your pilot,' the Doctor told interrupted helpfully.

Finney. 'And you're right, we didn't see that.' Finney nodded, a little

'Someone'll answer for that,' Finney growled. 'Thank you, Mister...'

mollified, as the Doctor continued: 'But the reason Allen suggested that

'Doctor. Doctor John Smith.'

you let us go is because he knows we can help you. My assistant and I

'Yeah, right,' Finney snorted. John Smith indeed... It was such a cliché.

helped him out last year in California, when a town was almost taken over

'I've been thinking of changing it,' the Doctor went on breezily. 'Have by... illegal aliens.'

we met before?' he asked, looking Finney up and down. 'I'm sure we

'Helped him out? But you are CIA?'

have.'

'It's not unknown,' the Doctor said dryly, with a heavenward

glance. 'I

'Not that I'm aware of,' Finney answered, diplomatically keeping to have Majestic clearance, but really I'm a freelance. I'll help anyone who himself the thought that he would certainly have remembered this strange needs it.'

little man.

Finney was almost convinced, but was nowhere near happy with the

'I could have sworn... Perhaps I just mistook me for someone else. I'm situation. 'How could you help us?'

sure it'll come back to me.' The Doctor smiled winningly.

'By identifying the origin of that disc, for a start.'

'Right,' Finney drawled uneasily. 'Where is the third one, the other

'I doubt even the CIA could manage that,' Finney said slyly. 'There is a

woman?'

possibility that it may originate from another world.'

'Search me,' Benny told him.

'You accept that?' the Doctor asked, throwing him a sidelong look.

'Why have you shut us in here, Colonel...?' the Doctor asked.

Something about his manner seemed vaguely familiar, and Finney

'Colonel Finney, in charge of Project Javelin. We believe you may have wondered if perhaps they really had met at some point. Ignoring the idea, stumbled across some... wreckage that relates to our work. As you are, he nodded. 'Our special scientific adviser theorized that months ago, shall we say, visitors to our country, we're naturally concerned about your when these things started invading our airspace.'

'Scientific adviser?' the Doctor asked, eyes wide. 'He's not a tall, white—

The jeep she had sheltered behind had a blown-out tyre, but an idling

haired-'

motorcycle lay beside its stunned rider a few yards away. Ace grinned

'Major Kreer of the AFOSI is neither particularly tall nor white-haired.'

wolfishly and holstered her blaster. The Doctor wasn't going to stop her

'Thank goodness for that,' the Doctor muttered, baffling Finney. 'Did riding one of these things like he had back in Perivale.

you say Kreer?'

Lifting the dusty machine from its side, she swung a leg over and

'Yes. Do you know him?'

twisted the throttle with relish. 'Steve McQueen eat your heart out,' she

'Never heard of him. Is there any chance we could discuss this with muttered, gunning the engine. Kicking up a spreading cloud of dust, Ace him?'

hurtled off in pursuit.

'I'm afraid not. He is... indisposed.' He could hardly admit to these two

It was a matter of moments to catch up with the truck, which began

that he didn't know where his own adviser was.

weaving from side to side before crashing through one of the flimsy

'In that case, why don't we go and carry on outside, and your Major plasterboard gatehouses. Between the roar of the engine and the rush of Kreer can investigate from the inside.'

blood in her ears, Ace never heard the Doctor and Benny's yells as they

That was an odd choice of words, Finney thought. He wondered if he ran out into the dusty road behind her.

could really trust the CIA to do what was best for his base. 'I've a better

She had occasionally borrowed Midge's bike when she was just a

idea. You can go and get something to eat in the mess. This evening, teenager, more to spite her mother than anything else, and had when the disc is cool, you can accompany some of my staff to it. The subsequently ridden similar hover-skimmers on various planets. Neither escort will be for your own security, of course, in the interests of co-Perivale tarmac nor future air, however, had prepared her for the uneven

operation.' That way we can keep an eye on you, he thought, while still road she now hurtled down. The plexiglass windshield did little to keep exploiting any good you might do.

the dust and grit out of her face, and she rode with her eyes screwed up

against the grainy onslaught. She clenched her teeth as her stomach was

Cautiously peering around the bonnet, Ace saw several men climb into left behind on several bumps and sharp turns once her quarry had turned the truck and slam the tailgate closed. Two of them jogged forward to the onto a churned desert track.

cab, the leader a baby-faced blond with a chill look. Ace stepped out

The truck continued to weave, throwing up more dust in her face. Ace

around the front of the jeep, blaster levelled squarely at the nearest man. was finding it difficult enough to keep the machine going in a straight line,

'Hold it, you,' she called.

and she too was soon weaving unintentionally across the road. This was

The two men halted and looked around with surprised expressions. fortuitous, as the now all too familiar disruptor whine squealed out Immediately upon seeing Ace, they raised their weapons. Ace hurled ineffectually.

herself back behind the jeep as a strange distortion caused the muzzles

Somewhat shakily, and as reluctant to crash the bike as to stop and let

to waver with a whine. It was certainly no flash of combustible materials. her quarry escape, Ace drew her blaster. She leaned it on the right The sudden realization took hold of her with a start; those were disruptor handgrip, to have a chance of being able to work on keeping the bike charges.

steady. She took an experimental pot-shot at the weaving truck, which

Focusing her surprise into more useful anger, she swung herself blew a scorched hole in its tarpaulin cover.

around the front of the jeep and squeeze off a couple of shots as the men

A volley of disruptor shots swept across her path, creating little vortices

bolted for the cab. Her first shot caught one in the back, blasting him in the blown dust.

away from the cab. The second shot blew the wing mirror off as the baby-faced one vanished inside. The rearmost men at the back of the truck Ahead, in the driver's seat of the truck, a sergeant floored the accelerator.

leaned out, and the whine of disruptor-fire overlaid the truck's throaty roar A curved silver surface gleamed in a hollow a short distance ahead. 'Did as it pulled away from the building.

any of the base personnel see you, sir?' he asked Stoker.

Ace loosed off more shots at the rear of the truck, the blazing energy

'Only the ones inside the briefing room. They've been given memory

bolts sending sprays of sparks from the tailgate. Rapidly obscured

by a wipes as well.' The two guards he had posted at the ship were alert, he rising cloud of dust, the truck roared off into the distance. Not interested in noted with a sense of pride. He could see them take up firing stances wasting her power-pack's energy by firing blind, but equally unwilling to among the rocks that masked the ship.

countenance the idea of letting them get away, Ace looked around for

The truck shook again as a flash lit up the rear-view mirror, and a cry

some way to get another chance to deal with them.

from behind rapidly faded. Glancing out of the door window, Stoker saw

one of his men roll to a halt in the dirt, almost run over by the motorcycle.

Gritting his teeth, Stoker felt a part of himself die with his man.

Forcing himself to pay attention to the road in front, he saw the guards **Chapter 6**

fire on his pursuer mere instants before the truck skidded to a halt in a

cloud of dust.

Kicking the door open, Stoker kept glancing back towards the Benny kept a hand clamped down on her hat as the Doctor, thin-lipped motorcycle as the dust cleared. To his satisfaction, its position was and grim, drove manically along the desert track, the Plymouth's marked by another cloud of dust, its twisted wheels barely visible lying on bodywork dented and scratched by stones kicked up by the wheels.

the ground. Dashing to the rear of the truck, Stoker opened the tailgate Squinting against the baleful glare of the low sun, Benny could feel her even as two of his men clambered out, carrying one of the crates between heart beat faster in its desperation to know what had happened to Ace.

them.

She tried to tell herself that it would be best to know, and promised herself

Ushering his men to take the crates into the disc, Stoker watched for that heads would roll if Ace was... Well, she didn't even want to think of any sign of movement from his erstwhile pursuer. Vaguely relieved that that.

there was none, he climbed in after his men, and the silver wall of the hull

Up ahead, a throbbing hum presaged the lift-off of a silver disc, which

flowed closed.

shimmered and vanished as it rose and banked westwards.

Amidst the dust stirred by the disc, a twisted mass of metal lay beside

a motionless figure slumped in the dust. The Doctor stopped the car and

leapt out. Benny followed anxiously.

In the middle of a patch of churned ground, Ace lay sprawled a few

feet from the overturned motorcycle, a large bruise forming on her cheek

and blood oozing from several small cuts. The Doctor pulled the curved

part the handle away from the stem of his umbrella and removed the

sphere that punctuated its question-mark shape. Undoing a small cap on

the red globe, he waved it under Ace's nose. Benny's nerves calmed

themselves as Ace coughed, waving away the phial as she struggled to

rise. She winced as she touched her temple gingerly, almost immediately

falling back to her knees and retching loudly. 'Shades!' she muttered thickly. 'I hate disruptor stuns.' She stood a little more steadily, spitting out

a mouthful of dirt as she looked towards the abandoned truck. 'They got

away, obviously.'

'Didn't they teach you about plans and tactics in the military?' Benny

sighed, lifting the first-aid kit from the car.

'You must be joking! Spacefleet weren't *that* concerned about the mere

Irregular Auxies.'

'That figures,' Benny agreed wryly. She sprayed some antiseptic on

Ace's cuts and then waited as Ace attached healing patches to them,

using the car's wing mirror for accuracy. The truth was, though Benny was

reluctant to admit it to herself except on occasions like this, that the Doctor and Ace were the only family she knew now. She had already lost

both her parents to raw hostility, and was beginning to realize of late that

she couldn't face losing either of them the same way. With ordinary people that wouldn't have made much difference, but considering the way

Ace grabbed trouble by the throat it probably wouldn't be long before she

gave herself an ulcer. If her heart didn't give up before that, strained by its

innumerable leaps into her throat, she added mentally. 'Come on,' she

said to her - almost - adopted kid sister, 'the Doctor seems to have found

something interesting.'

Chapter 7

Together they strolled - or at least Benny strolled, while Ace limped - to
join the Doctor at the damaged truck. The Time Lord was waving his
pocket radiation probe around the floor, and it crackled like hot fat on a 'Take us to Corman,' Kreer ordered smoothly as Stoker secured the two stove. 'So they were nukes, then?' Ace thought aloud.
casings for flight.
'Yes,' the Doctor agreed with a frown of distaste. 'Probably simple
'As you command, sir,' Xeno responded from the central station of the
medium-yield warheads and not hydrogen bombs, but bad enough.' He circular flight deck. In the main holosphere, the desert fell away, blurring jumped down from the truck. 'The question is, what do they want them as the skiff accelerated.
for?'
'You were almost late,' Kreer chided as Stoker came to stand beside
'Blackmail?' Benny suggested.
him. Kreer seethed inwardly at Stoker. What was the point of planning the
'Blowing up Fort Knox,' Ace put in.
operation to the second if you were unpunctual? 'Was there any
'It can hardly be anything so obvious, simple, or mundane. Look at it difficulty?' Kreer asked irritably.
this way,' he added, pointing at Ace. 'You were shot with a disruptor on
Stoker shrugged. 'The girl who accompanies the Doctor was there.
medium stun, and you,' he turned to Benny, 'saw the ship that took off. She tried to stop us.'
With technology that far above current terrestrial developments, they
'So he is here. I knew it! I told you he'd show up when his favourite
could empty Fort Knox, destroy the White House, conquer any and every planet came under threat. You destroyed her, of course?' Kreer went on country they chose. But for some reason they feel they need inferior warningly.
human technology...'
'Possibly. We couldn't stop to check. She was certainly out of the
'Fuel for their ships?' Ace hazarded.

action, though.'

'They'd have brought a supply with them, surely?' Benny pointed out.

'I suppose that will have to do,' Kreer mused with displeasure.

'Yes,' the Doctor agreed absently. 'Something doesn't add up here.' He

'We are approaching Corman, sir,' Xeno announced.

snapped the radiation probe closed with a sigh, and jammed it back in his

'Reduce power. Take us in.'

pocket. 'There's something not quite right about any of this.'

'What now?' Ace asked. Several jeeps were heading towards them and The artificial mountain root that was Corman AFB echoed to warning bells a helicopter buzzed overhead.

that sent airmen scurrying out into the circular area enclosed by foothills.

'Colonel Finney has offered us a place to wait, and an escort to the No aircraft was approaching through the narrow gap that allowed the end crash site,' the Doctor answered, 'and I think we should accept. Not only of the runway in from the dry lake. Instead, a silver disc lowered itself onto do I need a closer look at the disc if I'm to find out what we're up against, the helipad opposite the parabolic dish.

but...'

Even as the electric hum that surrounded it began to fade, the metal of

'But?'

its hatchway flowed back into the hull and Kreer and Stoker hopped out.

'But it's also a valuable piece of equipment which, with any luck, they'll An overall-clad groundcrew approached the skiff with low trolleys. 'I'll arm want back.'

the warheads tonight,' Kreer announced. 'Meanwhile, your men can store

them in hangar 18 along with Snowbird here.' He patted the hull of the

skiff as he finished.

'Your strategy is well-prepared,' Stoker acknowledged.

'Of course,' Kreer said with proud dismissiveness, as if he had been

praised by a child for completing the simplest task that seemed magical to

a youngster. 'Let's just say that isn't the first time I've hijacked something.

Although at least this time I have a more suitable band of followers,' he

added in satisfaction, indicating a group of men - in Air Force uniforms

and dark blue berets - who were forming up before the ship.

From a nearby concrete root, a small tractor was towing a large Sikorsky S-58 transport helicopter. 'We'll need the other skiff recovered

He felt honoured that his men now knew him well enough to break up

before the authorities can examine it too closely. Finney has it under conversations when he approached. He had nothing against talk *per se*, guard already, but the drive is still operating so it will no be cool enough to of course, provided it wasn't about sensitive subjects. Cosy family chats approach for a couple of hours yet. Take Dr Marlowe in the helicopter - it's were, after all, a cornerstone of his beloved society, and he liked his men slower, but you can't show up in another identical ship. You should arrive to feel that they were all part of one big happy family. Three was a crowd, about midnight.'

however, and he didn't like seeing crowds even that small, unless it was

'It would make good sense to fly it out before dawn.'

as part of a platoon or work squad. He could never be certain what such a

'You'd have to dismantle it first,' Kreer said.

group might be talking about, or planning, or even... conspiring. He knew

'Leave that to me. If you keep the runway clear for morning, I'll have that Communists were organized in cells, and that was just another name the skiff split into its separate sections and flown here in a transport.'

for groups, wasn't it? That sort of thing was un-American, and to be

'Excellent, Captain Stoker,' Kreer agreed with a faintly mocking smile. guarded against.

'By the way,' he drew out a manila envelope from an inside pocket, Nyby therefore was on guard constantly. He watched for gatherings of

'Personnel asked for this to be passed on to you.' He handed it to Stoker.

men and discussions in private. He had decreed long ago that the base

'Thank you,' Stoker acknowledged with a baffled frown. 'I'm sure it's was one big family who held no secrets from each other - except official nothing important.' He walked off towards the helicopter.

ones of his own - and that there should, therefore, be no private

'Oh, but it is,' Kreer murmured to himself. 'Divide and conquer,' he

discussions, where were the preserve of secretive Communist cells.

reminded himself.

There were those men under Nyby's command who said that the

general was a paranoid schizophrenic with a Napoleon complex, who had

Ace whistled a faint tune as she toyed with the unappetizing food in the been brain-damaged by the head-wound he got in England during the memento-decorated officer's mess at Holloman. 'We could pop back to second world war. There were also those men under his command who the TARDIS and pick up some stuff from my room,' she suggested hadn't suffered unfortunate 'training accidents' before being put on between mouthfuls.

permanent punishment detail.

'Whoever has been abducting those people has brought enough

When Nyby arrived at the entrance to S-Four, a huge concrete door

dangerous anachronisms to this area,' the Doctor said beside her. 'We set into the rise on which the large dish was mounted, he was shocked - if don't want to compound the problem, do we?'

unsurprised - to see Major Kreer and Captain Stoker in muted

Ace didn't mind; she was used to this reaction from him by now. Being conversation with Dr Marlowe; Nyby having been stuck with the prepared was something else she understood, though. 'Who could it be?'

bespectacled scientist as head of Project Snowbird.

'Akkers?' Benny suggested.

Before Nyby came close enough to hear their words, Kreer waved the

'Tennis-playing blancmanges?'

others away towards the S-58 as he moved over. Nyby added another

'How should I know?' the Doctor grumbled. 'I though you said one fell black mark to Kreer's roster for when the project was over. 'General,'

from the truck.'

Kreer greeted him.

'One did. I don't know where the body went. As for how should you

'Busy, Major?'

know...' Ace shrugged. 'You always do.'

'Some new equipment has arrived. I'm having it stored safely.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' Nyby said, looking into the dim hangar beyond

His dark skin and temperament giving him the carefully cultivated image with a sense of unease. The Pentagon had sent some strange

things of a human thundercloud, Nyby liked to tour his mountain-encircled base along to his base along with Kreer, and Nyby sometimes wondered if once in a while, in the firm conviction that fear of such unexpected there weren't some suspect characters among the top brass as well. In inspections would encourage his men to stay on their toes.

particular, he didn't like being given the responsibility of looking after *it*. Or He liked to find them hard at work when on duty, or asleep when not. perhaps he should say him, though it was difficult to tell. Kreer was the He was willing to tolerate the fact that the men played healthy, exciting, focus of all these irregularities, however, and so Nyby invariably focused American sports like baseball and football when off-duty, though he his ire on him. 'Was this authorized?'

accepted it only as a poor second best to resting or preparing for their

'Of course,' Kreer answered smugly. 'I have complete discretion to next shift. Sleep was fine as far as he was concerned, as it meant they procure equipment. The papers are all signed and sealed.' Nyby didn't would stay alert when on duty.

doubt that for a minute, but Kreer's posting orders were all in order as well

and he didn't think much of them either.

'That's fine, I'm sure. It's just that I sometimes wonder if you and *it* have America's interests at heart the way I do.'

Chapter 8

'How can you doubt that?' Kreer tutted softly. 'Didn't President

Eisenhower himself give you the orders when he came to welcome EBE-1

to America?'

Ace had been looking forward to repaying some of the bumps she had

'Yes, of course,' Nyby rumbled happily, remembering with pride. Nyby already received, and had been grimly eager when the Doctor announced himself meeting the legendary Ike. He had been... It was odd, but he that he had a plan of action. Unfortunately, this had consisted solely of couldn't quite recall exactly what had happened.

letting the Hispanic Sergeant Montoya drive them that evening to the bluff

'Excellent,' Kreer said in an approving tone that made Nyby furrow his where the disc had crashed.

brow in thought.

The Doctor, Ace and Bernice walked through the twilit activity with equally false calm. Small groups of overalled soldiers were trotting around

Leaving Marlowe in the rear compartment, Stoker pulled himself into into the perimeter and roughly pounding fence-posts into the ground, while the empty co-pilot's seat as the ground fell away beneath the helicopter.

another team followed in their wake with huge rolls of barbed wire. Under

The pilot was listening to Chuck Berry over a commercial radio the lee of the weathered bluff, men were erecting a marquee-sized frequency. Stoker considered ordering him to switch it off, but decided camouflage tarpaulin over the disc. Drably painted trucks and jeeps were against it. Nyby would have censured the pilot for listening to subversive spaced at irregular intervals, some of whose engines were still idling to music, Stoker thought, probably believing that only the likes of Sinatra provide start-up power for the several generators that were connected to and Crosby were worthy American entertainers. He doubted that it would arc lamps set up under the tarpaulin.

make any difference if Nyby knew that this type of music was considered

The crunch of footsteps and the metallic rattle of equipment was

an

subversive in the Communist bloc as well.

unending accompaniment to the time-travellers' passage through to the

Stoker suspected that too many restrictions would harm morale. He let crash site. Occasionally Ace or Benny would have to cover their mouth the pilot have his fun, since he sensed the small pleasure afforded would and nose with a handkerchief to protect against the dust that was filling make him more relaxed and happier, and therefore more efficient. the air.

Discipline had its place, but the carrot was as important as the stick it was

Abruptly, as they rounded the front of the M59 that was serving as a

tied to.

field command post, the Doctor waved them to a halt. He silently pointed

Settled in, Stoker drew out the envelope which Kreer had given him out a bus with blacked-out windows, which was disgorging men and before departure. Inside was a four-by-six monochrome photograph of a women in civilian dress. The newcomers were invariably doing almost group of smiling men in uniform. Stoker recognized only one of them.

comical double-takes at their first sight of the disc. A pair of officers were

Impossible though it seemed, it was himself.

greeting them as they emerged, gesturing towards the disc now and He stared at the picture, wishing that one of the frozen grey faces again. 'Scientists,' the Doctor whispered. 'Let's go and see how wrong could begin speaking and tell him what he was doing among them several they get things, shall we?'

months before he first came to the planet Earth.

Marion Davison stepped off the bus and froze, as shocked as if she had

just seen Eisenhower kiss Nikita Khrushchev. The sounds of hurried activity all around were blocked out by her own private silence, which

seemed to emanate from the disc.

Captain Vincente waved her aside with a disgruntled expression that

reminded Davison that there were others waiting to disembark behind her.

She stepped away from the bus, her line of sight a leash that tied her to

the gleaming disc which was swimming with liquid gold reflections from

the arc lamps.

The disc was incredible, projecting form the shattered earth like a frozen bead of quicksilver. Davison had never seen its like, and was sure

that no one else had either. She wasn't old enough to remember Orson the ground a couple of hundred yards away. Checking that no one was Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast of some twenty-odd years looking her way, she slipped off in the direction of the landing helicopter.

earlier, but had heard a rerun as part of a documentary on the panic it had

caused. She had listened to that as an excited twelve-year-old, blissfully Stoker hopped from the helicopter with practised ease and started off unaware of the chaos that the show had created in some towns. She had towards the activity under the arc lamps. He had neither eaten nor slept in heard the documentary that followed with a great deal of shock, scarcely over forty-eight hours, but showed no signs of weariness. He was believing how anyone could have given any credence to such a fanciful concerned, however, about the photograph. He knew he hadn't been on broadcast.

Earth at the time it was taken, but that wasn't what was bothering him.

Yet here she was, she told herself, facing a genuine alien artifact, and

He had wondered where he had been when the picture was taken, and

possibly one even more fanciful that those of Wells and Welles. The sight had been trying to remember just that. It was a natural progression; little of the disc made her think twice about her idea of announcing its incidents tended to provoke memories of one kind or another, though discovery to the press. If one Victorian drama could cause such panic most were of things of which one took no notice. He had been forced to then the revelation of the existence of a truly alien craft was one she quite take notice, however, when he realized that he could not recall where he frankly wasn't willing to take the responsibility for.

had been six months ago - not even which planet he had been on.

Her opposite numbers in the civilian press wouldn't see it that way, of

It had probably just been somewhere very boring, he told himself in an

course. They would advise a more courageous course of 'publish and be effort to dispel his unease, and not like Earth. Then again, he thought, he damned', doubtless complaining about Government cover-ups. She wasn't particularly excited by landing on Earth either. He tried to recall wondered if this was how Finney and Kreer would come to their how he felt immediately before coming to Earth, and stopped in his tracks.

decisions, or whether they really did have ulterior motives. She shrugged He couldn't even remember that. It was all very odd, he thought, but the thought away; Finney wasn't a bad man, she thought, and would nothing that concentration couldn't help. One thing he did remember was probably share her view. Kreer though...

that there were people waiting at the disc, so he collected his thoughts in

a more professional manner and moved onwards.

As soon as Montoya looked away, the trio melted into the darkness.

The here and the now were all that mattered.

Slipping behind a pile of crates, they conveniently paused to rest just

within earshot of several civilians. 'It couldn't be Russian,' one of them Following the edge of the hull, the Doctor touched it tentatively. Although was saying, and Benny rolled her eyes at his lack of imagination.

the disc had now cooled off, the surface still felt warmer than metal should

'Absolutely impossible,' a German-accented voice replied. 'The metal is even accounting for Re-entry and the afternoon heat. Pausing briefly, he so tough we can't cut through it, even with oxy-acetylene, diamond, or leaned in closer to the surface and squinted at it. It was silvery enough, borazon. Going by the hatch rim, though, it must be incredibly thin and but had the glossy sheen of a thin crystalline or ceramic layer. 'Pure flexible.'

terullian.' He continued on his way lest the attention he was giving the hull

'Hatch rim?' Benny mouthed silently, her interest piqued.

should become suspicious.

'It might have blown out on impact,' the Doctor murmured in a low

In a matter of moments he came to the gaping hatch. There was no

voice. 'Or was opened from the inside...'

sign of strain on the metal around it, simply a smooth round opening in

'If we can find that, we can get in for a look,' Benny suggested.

the hull. Peering closely at the edge, the Doctor couldn't find any

sign of a

'Right. You carry on in this direction, and I'll go back the way we came. rim or slot for a retracted hatch. His attention was suddenly drawn, If we circumnavigate the disc we're bound to come across the hatch at however, to a scarlet ridge about the size of his hand which bulged from some point.'

the hull like clotted blood above a deep cut. It was a circle, inside which

'I'll stay here and listen out for anything this bunch come up with,' Ace were three short horizontal lines, one above the other. A slightly longer added. Nodding silently, the Doctor and Benny slipped off into the night line stretch up from the centre, and was topped with an upward-pointing and left Ace sitting on the crates.

chevron. 'Oh no,' he muttered grimly.

'Well?' Benny asked, appearing out of the darkness.

The pattern of approaching lights attracted Ace's attention a moment

'It's a scout-ship. Wait here.' He stepped into the hatchway.

before the sound of the rotor blades reached her. Looking up, she saw a

dark mass blotting out the stars as it overflew the crash site and neared Davison was so taken with the unearthly beauty of the flimsy yet strong material of the disc's construction that she had all but forgotten her 'Classified information,' she added dryly.

notebook, preferring to run her hands over the smooth onyx surfaces that

'Yes, it doesn't matter. How very interesting, though.'

surrounded a crystal column as thick as a tree-trunk. 'Whoever built this

'What is?' Davison asked cautiously.

were artisans, not monsters,' she said to herself, ignoring the half-dozen

'I was just wondering what product of a mere level five civilization could

or so scientists in the chamber.

possibly interest one of your scientists more than the arrival of an alien

'They might even have been both, you know,' a stranger's voice craft made of pure terullian and run on a gravity drive powered by a answered, causing her to start violently, not having realized that she had catalytic matter-antimatter intermix.'

spoken aloud. Turning to the hatchway, Davison saw a short man in a

Davison looked blankly at him, not following a single word of it.

To one

pale suit half a size too big for him, who came over to join her. 'It's all side, the scientists were shaking their heads in pitying gestures. 'Too pretty standard engineering, of course,' the strange little man added in a much sun,' one of them whispered a little too loudly.

sharp Scottish accent.

It seemed to Davison, however, that the Doctor know something about

'Yes. Though how they flew it without controls...' Davison found herself the ship - he was just too matter-of-fact about the whole thing to be wondering. 'Mental power, perhaps. I remember a film once, where-'

making it up. But, she told herself, surely that was impossible. 'This has

'Of course there are controls,' the little man said crossly, tapping the obviously been an unmanned ship. That makes it less important in nearest onyx panel. 'You can't see them because the power's dead, so strategic-'

there's no energy being routed through the optical processors to configure

'Nonsense and you know it!'

the crystal membranes formed into this software-defined console.'

'Have you ever heard of a manned missile?'

Davison was not the sort of woman to relish pulling rank, but this man's

'There was a manned version of the V1, and the Japanese "Baka"-'

casuality bordered on the treasonous, even by her liberal standards. And

'Then what happened to the crew of this one?' Davison asked, a chill

as for the gibberish he was speaking... 'Is that your considered opinion?' creeping up her spine as the shadowy areas at the edge of her vision she demanded pointedly, hoping she had the right tone of command.

seemed to draw closer.

'The rank and file getting nervous about outside interference, eh?' The

'We're standing on them,' the Doctor told her. Davison looked down in

stranger smiled engagingly, and Davison returned the expression half—

horror, and saw a bipedal-shaped ashy scorch-mark on the deck plates.

heartedly.

Several other burnt patches were nearby. 'It's funny though; they have

This man was certainly sure of himself, Davison thought, but he was transmat technology, so why didn't they just beam out?'

an outsider. A spy? Davison doubted it somehow, though such a thing

By now the scientists had gone back out to report to their superiors,

would be refreshingly normal, feeling that a spy would at least try to blend with the exception of the German-accented one. 'This "transmat"; it is, I in with the crowd a little more. A though struck her, reminding her of imagine, an audio-vibratory physio-molecular transport device of some Finney's announcement that afternoon. 'Are you the guy called the kind?'

Doctor?'

'You mean-' Davison suggested.

'Among other things, I suppose. And you are Major...?'

'Yes, Major, it's something we ourselves have been working on for

'Marion Davison. So you're the spook in our midst?'

quite some time.'

'Why does everyone here assume that?' the Doctor asked

'Need to know basis, Doctor Von Scott,' Davison interrupted hurriedly.

exasperatedly.

The scientist nodded with a resigned expression and followed his

'You're either that or the worst agent on the GRU's books. Who else colleagues out.

would have known about Kreer? I imagine the CIA sends delegates to the

'One of them must have opened the hatch first,' the Doctor went on.

monthly IPU conferences that he attends.'

'Probably accidentally; thrown onto the control by the impact.'

'Colonel Finney mentioned that he was your scientific advisor.' The

'Doctor Marlowe thinks it was blown off by a rapid pressure change.

Doctor trailed off, looking around. 'In which case why isn't he here? To Men are looking for the cover right now.'

him, this ship should be like Tutankhamun's tomb was to Howard Carter.'

'They won't find anything. The hull is software-definable as well, you

'He divides his time between Holloman and Corman AFB in Nevada. see; it forms a hatchway as and when one is needed.' The

Doctor smiled.

He's in charge of Project Snowbird up there.'

'How would you like to be seconded to Allen Dulles' operations for a

'What's Snowbird?'

while?'

'How the hell should I know?' Davison's suspicions began to resurface.

Davison couldn't help feeling that she didn't really have that much of a

choice of answers. She reviewed her thought about the Doctor, deciding parsecs away. What bothers me is that, even according to the Matrix that he couldn't be a spy, but certainly could be an escapee from an records on Gallifrey, the closest they ever came to Earth was the asylum. She was about to dismiss him and have him arrested when establishment of mining colonies on three planets of the Reticulum another thought struck her. Finney was certainly aware that this man system, which is still a good fifty-odd light years away.'

worked for the CIA, so there shouldn't really be any doubts about him.

'And these Velto - whatever it was; they're aliens too?' Davison asked

There had been a recent report, however, that the CIA were incredulously. 'The future now,' she muttered. 'What are they going to try experimenting with psychological warfare techniques culled from the next?'

Chinese via former POWs returned from Korea. Is this man using me as a

'Obviously,' the Doctor wend on, apparently oblivious to the comment.

guinea-pig in some sort of test, she wondered. Perhaps the whole crash 'Veltroch is the second planet of Fomalhaut.' He tapped at a panel under was rigged to see whether the *War of the Worlds* scenario would repeat one of the panels on the central circular console. 'The Tzun tried to itself among service personnel... Now this was a story worth exposing, establish a colony there in 2172,' he went on. 'The first thing they did was Davison decided, determining that she wasn't going to fail this test - no try to clear a bridgehead in what they though was uninhabited jungle.'

matter how strange it got. 'I'd be delighted,' she smiled. Give the CIA

'Unfortunately for them,' Benny said, relishing the chance to give a

enough rope, she thought...

history talk, 'the jungle was a hatching ground. The Veltrochni are egg—

laying mammals, like the duck-billed platypus, except that they're

Benny ran her hand over the bas-relief symbol on the hull. It was vaguely arboreal-'

familiar somehow. She was damned if she was going to stay outside this

'They're what?'

relic from her past, however, and entered as soon as the last scientist had

'They live in trees,' the Doctor said indistinctly, his head burrowed gone. The Doctor was talking to a slim, bespectacled woman who inside the console. 'Like sloths.'

seemed to have an air of charming naïvety. The corner of her left jawbone

'The whole region what flattened,' Benny resumed, 'and the eggs

was pink with burnt tissue, as was her left hand, though her uniform hid destroyed. The Veltrochni clans are a very close-knit race, though, and any other mark.

family is everything to them. The natural course of action for them was to

The symbol was repeated here and there on panels, accompanied by hit back. In two years they had turned S'Arl into a radioactive cinder and some kind of written language. 'We're having some people sent out to try destroyed the entire Tzun starfleet, along with as many colonies as they and decipher that,' the woman was saying.

could find.'

'Benny,' the Doctor said, seeing her enter. 'What do you think?'

'They destroyed the whole species?' Davison asked in a mortified tone.

She lifted her hand from the symbol. The Doctor stood aside in a

'A few Ph'Sor Tzun colonies survived because they had been

manner that told her he knew the answer and was a proud teacher absorbed into the territorial areas of other powers, such as the Terran waiting for a favourite pupil to show her worth. She didn't like it much. 'It Federation, but none of them are capable of spaceflight any longer,' the looks like the glyph of the old Tzun Confederacy, but they never reached Doctor finished, emerging with a small crystalline cube in his hand, which Earth.'

pulsed softly. 'That's all in the future. This beacon could bring a flotilla of

'Something else the history books got wrong, it seems. This is a Tzun Stormblades on top of us right now.' Benny was momentarily alarmed, but scout-ship all right, or a skiff in their naval terminology.

The hull's made of relaxed as he drew out the sonic screwdriver and triggered it. The cube high-grade terullian and the interior furnishings fit their physiology to a T.' stopped glowing, and the Doctor dropped it absently into a pocket. 'I He gave the surroundings another long look. 'What do you know about doubt they'd be so rash, however. They're nothing if not strategists.'

the Tzun?' he asked suddenly.

'You've met them before?' Benny asked.

She shrugged, but not too much, since she was in her element. 'Not as

'Twelve hundred years ago, at Mimosa II.'

much as I should, since S'Arl has been in Draconian space since the last

'They're conquerors, then?' Ace put in, greeting them as they exited

Dalek war. The Confederacy lasted a good twenty-five thousand years, the skiff.

until they were destroyed by the Veltrochni around the 2170s and S'Arl

'Far worse,' the Doctor said in a sour voice. 'Warrior races are ten a

was rendered uninhabitable.'

penny. Every civilization goes through a warlike phase - it's an outgrowth

'S'Arl?' Davison asked.

of the "survival of the fittest" ethos. Most races either see the error of their

'Their home,' the Doctor said with a nod. 'Sixth planet of Hadar - that's ways, or else they wipe out either themselves or each other. The Tzun Beta Centaurus to your astronomers, about a hundred and twenty never did; they just got more intelligent and more dangerous. As well as being among the most skilled warriors in history, they're also...' He tailed

Leaving the scientist to enter the ship, Stoker surveyed the activity for

off, looking lost.

a few seconds, then walked off towards the M59.

'Sneaky bastards?' Ace supplied.

'Not quite the phrase I'd have used, but...'

'You're a Major, Davison,' the Doctor said thoughtfully. 'I don't have to call

'In what way?' Benny asked.

you that do I? It's terribly long-winded.'

'In every way,' the Doctor replied unhelpfully. As his pause lasted

'Just Marion, then. As head of the press and public relations office for

Benny realized he was no longer looking at her and Ace, or even at this sector of aerospace Defense Command, a mid to high rank is Davison. Turning, she saw one of the scientists talking with an Aryan- practically guaranteed.' She shrugged, making light of the matter. 'It's no

looking man. Something nagged at Benny's mind until she realized that big deal, and I never really have to give orders,' she added with a hint of the scientist was standing almost dully, his shoulders slumped and hands pride.

hanging limply by his sides. After a moment the two walked off around the

'You'll give some tonight,' the Doctor told her flatly. 'We thr-we four

other side of the disc, the scientist moving with a somnambulant gait. have to be on the plane that flies this ship to wherever our friend there

'Especially when helped,' the Doctor added.

wants to take it.'

Benny wasn't sure if he was finishing his earlier sentence or adding to

'Corman Field is a Strategic Air Command base in northern Nevada.

another, unspoken, one. Somehow, neither possibility failed to send a They do some kind of research there for a Project Snowbird. As for the S-shiver up her spine.

Four area, I assume it's a test facility of some kind, since that designation

is usually given to nuclear facilities. It might be something else to do with

Stoker was too engrossed in his conversation with Dr Marlowe to notice Snowbird, whatever it is.'

the Doctor and the others sidle up nearby, skulking around the far side of

'The captain presumably knows.'

a slim crane as if trying to decide how best to lift the disc with it. 'All

'Him there?' Ace cut in. 'That's the same albino jackrabbit sonofabitch

power's dead in the disc,' Marlowe was saying, 'but we've found an odd who started that excitement at Holloman this afternoon. I'm sure of it.'

gear mechanism under the central core that may be some kind of

'Him?' Davison snapped in disbelief. 'You must be mistaken. That's

emergency manual connecting point for interlocking segments

making up Captain Stoker, Kreer's ADC.'

the disc - exactly like the one on Snowbird.'

' *Quis custodiet custodes ipsos*,' the Doctor commented. 'That makes it

'That could be,' Stoker said tightly, trying to remember to keep a even more important we be on that plane.'

certain amount of wonder in his voice. 'If it fits together in an iris form,' he

Davison looked at him worriedly, then calmed herself down. She wasn't

suggested with a faint spread of his hand in the direction of the disc.

going to let them spook her, since that was probably the whole point of

'An iris!' Marlowe exclaimed. 'I should have considered that for a the exercise.

circular aeroform - especially if it spins in flight. If they'd only let me dismantle Snowbird for a full examination, this would be much easier...'

Englobed by a vanguard of six strategically placed skiffs, the Tzun Strom

'The flight trials are more important.'

blade *R'Shal* hung beyond the Earth's thin envelope of atmosphere.

'Yes, I suppose so.' He looked up at the jib hanging from the crane

In the circular war room, which was ringed with statues and had a large

arm. 'If we could separate the segments, it'd be easier to ship out quietly. plaque set into the floor at the centre of a ring of seats, the tall frame of We could fly it out of Holloman in a Guppy tonight and reassemble it at S-Tzashan, wreathed in the support equipment that kept him alive, tapped a

Four over at Corman.' His lined face took on a smirk that told Stoker he communications panel. ' *Kron*'s transponder has gone dead. Have we lost was already mentally examining every part of the craft at S-Four.

it?'

That was a bridge Stoker was willing to cross when he came to it. For

'No, though it was a close thing. The humans,' Kreer's unmistakable

the moment, he was glad of Marlowe's attitude, since it meant that he voice sneered, 'nearly got there first but I have things in hand. Stoker is at would stay with the disc every waking hour and so not need to be the crash site now, arranging recovery.'

guarded and kept out of the way. 'Go ahead. I'll take full

responsibility
'Excellent. First Councillor Shok'Arl is awaiting its arrival at the forward
under AFOSI authorization. You separate the segments and have them base at Corman.'
loaded onto the trucks while I call Holloman to have a Guppy made ready
for our arrival - I don't want to leave this thing sitting on the runway for Marion watched from a jeep on the tarmac as a number of lines slashed even one moment if I can help it.'
across the disc's smooth surface, curving inwards from the outer edge as

if drawn by an invisible pen. Immediately, a crane arm swung out and
lifted one of the sections away from the rest of the ship, as Stoker and
Marlowe emerged from the hatchway in a neighbouring segment. They **Chapter 9**
boarded the swollen form of the huge Guppy transport aircraft by a long
boarding ladder. 'They're on board,' she said doubtfully, 'but I don't know...'
Colonel Finney looked out over the snowy sea of dawn-lit gypsum crystals
'You spoke to Finney on the radio, didn't you?' the Doctor reminded from the observation gallery in the launch control bunker at White Sands.
her. 'He did say we were observers and to be looked after?'
A number of technicians were busily reviewing the previous day's radar
'Yes.'
tapes, trying to glean what information they could about the destruction of
'Well, what we're observing is about to move,' he said pointedly, the missile.
indicating the floodlit nose of the Guppy, which was split to allow a hoist to
'Sir,' someone called, and Finney moved towards the radar display
manoeuvre sections of the disc aboard. 'So look after us.'
showing current events.
Marion wasn't certain, and suspected that the Doctor was interpreting
'What is it, Montoya?'

Finney's decisions somewhat loosely. On the other hand, he could well be

'This.' Montoya pointed at a small blip on the screen, which was rapidly

right. She looked at the three strangers reservedly. 'Well, I suppose, as a dropping in altitude. 'It just appeared out of nowhere at Angels-five-zero major I have the rank to take command of the escort...'

and started dropping.' Already the blip was pausing at ground level. It

'Splendid idea!' the Doctor said delightedly. He hurried on board before suddenly started rising again.

she could change her mind.

'Get on to Vincente over at Holloman tower and ask if he's tracking

this. If we can triangulate-' The blip vanished at five hundred feet. 'Damn!

Ask if they tracked it anyway.'

'It could have just been an angel,' Montoya suggested.

'It's possible, I suppose,' Finney admitted sceptically. The temperature

inversion that produced a volume of air dense enough to be detectable on

radar wasn't uncommon in the local climate. Finney didn't believe it, though. There had been just too much happening recently to allow him to

believe in coincidence to that extent.

He wished he could have been surprised when Kreer walked in the

door five minutes later.

Its polished fuselage gleaming almost as brightly as the quicksilver surface of a Tzun skiff, a rounded and ungainly aircraft with a grotesquely

inflated forward fuselage lumbered through the clear air high above the

mountainous Four Corners region of northern New Mexico. Unusually, the

plane carried no national or service markings. Instead, there was merely a

serial number repeated here and there in tiny lettering. A row of scalloped

mounds, tightly wrapped in tarpaulins, were arranged along the full length

of the Guppy's cavernous cargo hold. Marion Davison descended from

the bulkhead that separated the hold from the small passenger section

where Stoker, Marlowe, and the guards were ensconced. 'Stoker isn't happy about my being here,' she admitted to the three new advisers, 'but

there isn't much he can do as I'm legit. If he notices that two of you are

women, though...'

'What difference would that make?' Benny asked. 'So are you.'

'Women aren't allowed to be combat troops, not even guards, so I can't

see him accepting that the Intelligence community is more open. We're least.'

supposed to serve in the mess, fly the occasional transport, look good on

'What are you talking about?' Marion wondered what had made her

recruiting posters. You won't see one with an important job.'

trust this little man, CIA mindbender or not. She wasn't sure, but

'Except you,' Ace said.

suspected it was his air of truthfulness - if not really honesty - about the

Marion smiled faintly. 'They tolerate me on sufferance, because of this.' disc.

She gestured vaguely at her scarring.

The Doctor didn't answer, but pressed her hand to the left side of his

'Keeping up the numbers for a disabled quota?' Ace sneered.

chest. For an instant, she was enraged at the liberty, but then realized

'Not exactly. I was training as a transport pilot when I enlisted, but that she'd never met a less sexual man. Perhaps he was spoken for by when our wing was on guard duty at the munitions store one night, there Ace or Benny, but she'd seen no sign. 'Feel that?'

was an accident. Some asshole had been smoking where he shouldn't

'Of course,' Marion said, a strong if rather slow heartbeat pounding

and the whole lot started to go up. There was a guy between me and the along her arm. Maybe he was homosexual, she thought, if the intelligence way out, so I grabbed him and dragged him with me, because it would services didn't have the same restrictions as the military.

have been slower to try and to go around him. As it was, I came out with

'Good.' He moved her hand to the right side of his chest. 'Feel that?'

he

all this, right down the left side. The Air Force wanted a recruiting heroine, asked, and Marion's world turned upside down.

so they picked me for bringing that guy out; they got some good publicity

out of giving me a promotion.' She shrugged, not pleased about what had The morning skies were less clear over Washington DC, as rain hissed in happened to her, but accepting by now that it was a part of who she was. sheets along Pennsylvania Avenue to darken the brownstone forms of the

'They won't let me fly, of course, but otherwise I manage okay.' This didn't buildings of the Federal Triangle two blocks down from the White House.

mean she relished going over it, however; she looked towards the Although the building took up a whole block directly opposite the Justice Doctor's efforts with a penknife at the nearest tarpaulin. 'Having fun?'

Department building across Pennsylvania Avenue, Joe Manco never got

'It's clever workmanship, I'll admit,' the Doctor called back. 'These to see it.

bulkheads between the sections are software-definable as well, and can

In his musty corner office at the back of the building, he watched fuse with adjacent sections as needed.'

gloomily as black pools formed in the hollows of the roof of Ford's

'What the hell does that mean?' Marion demanded. She was beginning Theatre, which was one storey below his level and diagonally opposite to regret - or, more accurately, beginning to recognize that she regretted - across the crossroads at East and 10th.

resisting her instinct to have the Doctor and his crazy friends arrested.

Like most of his fellow agents, Manco bore more resemblance to an

Don't let these spooks get to you, she reminded herself, and forced a airline steward than a heroic he-man. A crooked smile crossed his rangy placating smile.

features, as if he were perversely pleased to be unhappy for some

'It means that the material of the hull, in this case terullian, can be reason. In fact he was considering how apt the image of those pools was.

programmed at the molecular level to behave a certain way. At the If the rain continued they would eventually grow together, joining to form moment, they're programmed to form a solid coating about two larger pools in just the same way that illicit groups would grow

together to centimetres thick, but when the disc is assembled they'd be programmed form alliances to eat away at the fabric of the country as the dampness so that the molecules of each pair of adjacent surfaces will act as if would eat the roof. That was the official story anyway.

they're part of a singly object, like a bulkhead partition four centimetres

Manco wasn't really interested in whether there really were

thick, with any gaps or partings necessary. That's why there were no joins subversives or not, though the influence of Edna, as he and his cohorts visible on the hull before the segments were separated - the hull was secretly referred to Hoover, was too strong to allow him to show much of programmed to exist as a single object. That also means that no human this. The reason for his disinterest was mainly because he would never should have known how to separate the sections.' The Doctor frowned. see anything of those groups, since he was what they laughingly called

'Wasn't it Stoker who told Marlowe how the disc could be separated?'

an analyst. Basically, this meant that he had to read the various foreign

'That's ridiculous,' Marion protested, drawing away slightly. 'He's as newspapers and underground publications to search for subversive human as you are.'

material. At first this had seemed like an important duty, but he soon

'I don't doubt that for a moment.' With disconcerting speed, the Doctor came to realize that most of the material was either propaganda - in the grabbed Marion's wrist, positioning his thumb over her pulse. Before she foreign papers - or simple teenage rebellious satire.

could snatch her hand angrily back, he had released it. 'You're human, at

The thought had also been haunting him that if he, who read these

every day for a living, was not corrupted by them, then it was unlikely that native to a blue spectrum, you see, so Earth sunlight would blind them.

a less regular reader would be corrupted either. He wondered if any film These pantropic Tzun are the S'Raph.'

censors felt that way. For the past week, therefore, he had been trying to

'It's what passed as humour to the Tzun,' Benny cut in. 'The word

think of a way to make his feelings known without giving the impression translates as "Angel".'

that he *had* been corrupted. He wasn't having much success.

'The S'Raph are little grey beings, about three to four feet high, big

To try and show by doing, therefore, he had volunteered to help a heads and black eyes. They make up the bulk of the Tzun starfleet, colleague by donating the rest of his time - which was normally occupied though a trio of pure-bloods usually accompanies any major operation, by writing his own propaganda to counter the foreign stuff - to a case he with an external circulatory system grafted in so that they can survive for had discovered quite by accident in a suspect flying saucer journal. The long sleeper journeys and visit planets with higher gravities and stories of unlikely aeroforms filling the skies didn't impress him that much, atmospheric densities than S'Arl.'

but he had come across interesting testimony from anonymous

'Which is most planets,' Benny added.

correspondents who claimed to be in the armed forces. Any other agent

'And the third type?' Marion prompted.

might have turned them in for court-martial, but when the original

'The Ph'Sor are tailor-made by combining both Tzun genes and DNA

investigator had vanished, it became another matter.

with that of whoever occupies the planet they're colonizing. That way they

The strangest thing was that anonymous witnesses from two different get a loyal populace who are perfectly suited to the planet in question. My bases a thousand miles apart had reported suspicions about the same guess is that your friend Stoker is a Ph'Sor fusion of Tzun and human.

two officers.

He'll have come to Earth in one of these,' the Doctor went on, indicating

A click drew his attention to the switchboard and large reel-to-reel tape the disc sections. 'The graviton drive rides gravity waves in the same way recorder that were set up in one corner, and he hurried to don the that radio transmissions ride electromagnetic waves.'

attached headphones as his phone-tap came to life.

'But that breaks every rule of physics,' Marion protested, trying to recall

those early flight classes. 'You'd be as well talking about flying carpets!'

Marion Davison had finally managed to stop her hands shaking. Hadn't

'The laws of physics your people have got on the statute books are

there been something in *Scientific American* recently about new

often about as convoluted and illogical as your civil laws,' the Doctor told developments in medicine that meant people could soon have electrical her dismissively.

stimulators implanted to keep weak hearts beating? The Doctor's

'Just how did you get here again?' Marion asked, wondering what the

heartbeat had been slow, no more than two dozen to the minute, so guards were thinking of when they let this lunatic through. She wondered perhaps he had one of those things and that was producing the other beat what she was doing listening to him.

on the other side. She knew she wasn't very convincing, even to herself,

'Dimensional transcendence.'

but clung to the idea like a drowning person clings to driftwood. 'What are

'Dimensional...?'

the Tzun things like?' she added.

'It's perfectly simple. The universe is basically infinite, because it has

'Which type?' the Doctor replied, then shook his head. 'Never mind. no exterior boundaries. At the same time, because any finite number The Tzun species is split three ways. Originally they could easily pass as divided by infinity is zero, then although the universe has eleven humans, probably as an Asiatic. When they discovered space travel, dimensions it is also a single point with no dimensions at all. Since there however, they had to modify themselves to withstand the acceleration of is nothing outside then nothing can enter or leave, and all that can their rough and ready drives, not to mention any brief exposure to vacuum happen is that the state of its contents can change. Are you with me so if something went wrong.'

far?'

'Altered?'

Marion gave a weak, wordless smile.

'The technique is called pantropy. All personnel assigned to space

'Good. Now, because the universe is an infinite single point there's no

operations were operated upon to collapse their lungs, recycle body reason why you can't go from one point to another instantly on account of wastes and replace their natural blood with an artificial polymer-based the fact that you aren't actually moving because you're staying put in the substance that would double as a shock-absorber, so to speak. Their one point that is the universe. Since time is just another dimension also DNA was altered so that it would completely break down all non-essential divided by infinity, the same principle

applies. All you have to know is how fats, and their eyes were altered to react to infra-red and ultraviolet to get down to the basic building blocks of reality.'

frequencies which are universal constants. The pure-blood Tzun are

'Which are?'

'Numbers,' the Doctor said simply. 'The essence of matter is structure,

'Because I ordered that the information was not to be announced.'

and the essence of structure is mathematics. When your physicists get

'Not even to the test project leader?'

around to investigating quantum mechanics and sub-nuclear physics,

'I'm announcing it to you now. This material has been in contact with

they invariably find that even the smallest particle is always made of some kind of aerial phenomena. It is now under the aegis of Project something even smaller. There always follows a point as which that Moondust, just like any other anomalous skyfall. Only those with Majestic something smaller is too small to have a physical existence and can only clearance or higher are permitted to view it.'

exist as a mathematical concept in the mind of the observer. All you have

'Do you mean you won't even let my engineers examine this to

to do is manipulate those concepts to effect changes in the physical determine what can be done to prevent a repeat occurrence at the next universe - turn parts inside out as TARDISes, warp space and time, hop test?'

between dimensions, all that sort of thing.'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible,' Kreer confirmed, Finney's emotional

'That's like something out of *Future Boy*,' Marion sneered.

squirming being one of his few pleasures of late. 'As soon as the Guppy

'That's the principle behind warp matrix engineering, a cornerstone of returns from Corman, I shall fly this material out there personally. You'll Time Lord science!' the Doctor exclaimed in an offended tone. 'Anyway, find the requisition papers all in order.'

you did ask how we got here.'

'No doubt,' Finney replied, unconsciously mimicking Nyby's tone.

'I meant how did you get into the crash site without the guards carting

'Perhaps you would feel happier if I went around giving away classified
you off in a strait-jacket?'
information to all and sundry,' Kreer suggested snidely. 'You yourself, of
'Oh, I see.' The Doctor looked taken aback and, Marion thought, not a course, have sufficient clearance to accompany me.'
little disappointed, judging by his crestfallen expression. 'I'm a friend of
'I don't think that will be necessary,' Finney declared. Kreer felt that the
the director of Central Intelligence.'
reply was a little more hasty and forceful than usual. 'I can't leave this
area while the missile tests are still incomplete.'
Kreer was absently turning a piece of charred metal over and over in his
'Naturally; doing so would be neglecting your duty to the country.'
hand when Finney stormed angrily into the room after him. The chamber
'Exactly,' Finney agreed, nodding. 'I can't let America down, not at had formerly been a general engineering area out in one of Holloman's these important times.'
large outbuildings, but was now filled with the twisted wreckage of the
'Very well,' Kreer agreed with a thin smile. 'Any design changes Atlas missile. A guard outside closed the door after Finney.
suggested by the analysis will be forwarded to you, of course. Was there
Kreer ignored him at first, almost unwillingly recalling the previous anything else?'
occasion when he had served as a scientific adviser of sorts. Then, as
'Not really,' Finney answered in a vaguely puzzled tone. 'I just wanted
now, he was expected to complete the impossible in half the time it would to check that everything was secure.' With a weak salute, he turned and take. At least the Englishman who had co-opted him then had been a little left.
more understanding than Finney, and considerably more so than Nyby.
Kreer watched him go, amused by the ease with which the suggestion
Kreer thought that was quite strange, considering the

circumstances of of a flight deflected Finney's interest more efficiently than bonded that service. Typical human woolly thinking, he sneered to himself. Kreer polycarbide armour deflected energy-bolts. As if the contemplation of the would have been the first to admit, though, that he himself could be the other man's weakness reminded him of something, Kreer raised one most unforgiving of them all. That was his privilege as a superior being, gloved hand in front of his face, squinting at the fingertips without really he knew instinctively. It was time, however, that he acknowledged knowing why.

Finney's presence.

The renewed realization shocked him like a dousing with iced water.

'Yes?' he snapped before adding, in a baldly and deliciously 'No... Not again... I will not allow this to distract me,' he muttered forcefully disrespectful tone, 'sir?'

to himself in a tight voice. 'I will not fear my own body,' he snarled,

'I sometimes wonder if you aren't letting un-American thoughts get the resisting the sense of discomfort that flooded him as completely as if his better of you, *Major*,' Finney said sharply. 'This is the Atlas wreckage,' he worst enemy had walked in.

stated in an accusing tone.

In front of his haunted eyes, the tips of the black leather fingers were

'As much as your men could find,' Kreer admitted, amusing himself by bulging outwards, the material thinning under the hard pressure from lacing his voice with a dissatisfied tone.

within.

'Why wasn't I told that it had been gathered here?'

* * *

Marion felt that she was now on a roll. The fact that she had got they may have evolved beyond even that...' His voice faded, leaving only immediate - if incomprehensible - answers to her questions had the clouded expression on his face.

demolished what nervous barriers to her curiosity were left. I feel like a

Marion eyed the tarpaulins with ever-changing new suspicions. 'I'd got

journalist for once, she realized with considerable surprise.

into the habit of not asking questions,' she said apologetically, 'which isn't

'What do these aliens want with Earth? To take it over?' She tried to such a virtue for a journalist.'

keep her tone level and businesslike, not wanting to face the

horrors that

'No it isn't,' the Doctor agreed, 'but it's hardly surprising either, her imagination pushed into the spotlit arena of her forebrain.

considering the times. Fear drives a lot of emotions, and also forms a lot

'Not in the way you mean,' the Doctor answered, leaning back in the of habits we can't break; little Iron Curtains in here,' he tapped his canvas seat against the interior wall of the fuselage. 'The Tzun forehead, 'between the summit of your achievements and the pit of your Confederacy has to keep expanding and adding new races to survive. fears. Humans are always building new barriers and borders for When they first broke out into space twenty-five millennia ago, the whole themselves, of one kind or another.' He leaned back with a quizzical look.

sector was controlled by what were popularly called the Darklings. They 'I wonder which frontier Colonel Finney finds it so hard to cross.'

were a fungoid people originally from Yuggoth, but after they fought the

'He...' Marion wondered how to answer the question without

Tzun they were driven back into an enclave in 61 Cygni. Although the embarrassing her commanding officer. 'He doesn't like flying,' she Tzun defeated their aggressors, they were left with corrupted DNA and a finished.

very fragile genome, courtesy of Darkling genetic weaponry. Over the

'Really? Surely the Air Force was an odd choice of service,' the Doctor

following centuries the Tzun sought a way to heal their dying race, and muttered thoughtfully.

perfected genetic engineering to an almost legendary degree.'

'Necessity being the mother of invention.'

'Exactly. The Tzun geneticists eventually discovered that the only way

to stabilize their genome was to piggy-back it with a stronger one. Their

affliction was eventually cured, but they'd got into the habit of evolving.'

'You mean they want to interbreed with us?' Marion gasped

incredulously, aghast at the mental image projected by a subconscious

that had been fed on movies of the 'aliens coming to steal Earth women'

type.

'Not literally,' the Doctor said with a 'why me?' look. 'They

combine the
DNA strands of conquered races with their own, and vice versa. That way
they develop more of an acclimatization to other environments and ways
of thinking, while the conquered race think along Tzun lines. And become
suitable for processing into S'Raph, of course.'
'And they've got disruptors,' Ace reminded them.
'Whatever they are,' Marion grumbled. Mere technology didn't concern
her after that little story. Wherever they got their psychological techniques
from, she thought, the CIA couldn't have paid the inventor nearly enough
for such an effective piece of work.
'Dangerous anachronisms is what they are,' the Doctor informed her.
'A disruptor projects ultrasonics along a microwave beam, and vibrates
the molecules of the target so violently from the inside out that they rupture cell by cell.'
'Why haven't they just invaded and got on with it?' Ace asked
practically.
'I'm not sure. A single Stormblade could conquer this planet as easily
as most people change TV channels. They're cunning and ruthless, but

between themselves and Stoker. 'Interesting dish over there,' the Doctor
murmured, indicating a structure reminiscent of a small radio telescope.

Chapter 10

'We'll have to take a look at that.'

'What's more interesting,' Benny added, 'is that all the guards and all

the men coming over to deal with the disc are blond like Stoker. It's like a

Coming in low over the shimmering dry lake to the east, the swollen Hitler Youth training camp here.'

Guppy buzzed towards Corman like a huge metallic bluebottle. Inside, the

'Yes, that is strange, even though it's more or less what I expected.

Doctor and the others strapped themselves into the canvas seats as the Wait here.' Moving around the covered mound, he greeted two men who aircraft lurched downwards to bounce onto the runway with a squeal of were handling a small winch. 'Excuse me,' the Doctor began, 'but do you strained tyres.

need any help with that?' He smiled broadly.

The fat aircraft had barely ground to a halt when teams of overalled

The nearer of the two turned to the Doctor with a stony look, his eyes

men appeared from the concrete prosthetics that were grafted onto the not so much blue as violet. 'Assistance is unnecessary, the task ordered mountain roots, rushing to manoeuvre the clamshell nose doors open and is within our capability. Do you require directions to your post?'

draw out the carefully packaged sections of the Tzun skiff.

'No, no, I just thought a little extra help-'

Emerging from the cockpit doorway of the Guppy, Stoker watched

'Independent consideration is unnecessary for this physical task.'

anxiously as the troops from Holloman fanned out around the shrouded

'As you say,' the Doctor said lightly, then returned to Ace and Benny.

bulk below. Outwardly collected, he darted around the sectioned cargo 'Very single-minded, that young man. Speaks like a Tzun as well.' He with a nervousness he knew he should not be able to feel. He irritably looked thoughtfully at where Marion was conversing with Stoker. 'Did he waved the troops to stand clear as a large flatbed tractor-trailer emerged see your face at Holloman?' he asked Ace.

from the wide maw that beckoned gloomily from the S-Four area.

'I certainly saw him, so it seems wise to assume he saw me.' Me giving

His anger was mostly directed at himself, though he would have been advice on wisdom, she thought; how things change.

a liar if he had denied searching for some sign of imperfection from the

'Then I'd better talk to him.'

performance of any of the men around him. Intellectually, he knew that

'You said you'd met the Tzun before.'

the important thing was to accept events and adapt to overcome them,

'It's all right. I was over a foot taller then, with curly hair.'

but something twisted within him and snarled that outsiders from

Holloman should never have been allowed close inspection of the skiff. Stoker considered Davison's story, which was a bit vague but had the ring He wondered briefly if he ought not to consult with Surgeon-Major Ksal of truth about it. He had intended to give the guards memory-wipes, but about these bouts of ragged emotionalism.

since their leader was involved with affairs for the whole southern sector,

The tramp of boots on tarmac filled the air around the open nose of the this option was closed as being too risky. 'You may write your story on aircraft as Stoker bent to check the ties on the ropes and cables holding this, if it is first passed to myself or Major Kreer for security vetting,' Stoker the tarpaulins over the talon-shaped sections. The guards from Holloman decided reluctantly.

were keeping to themselves, out of the way of the Corman men. Their

Davison was about to answer, but another voice came from behind

leader looked familiar, and Stoker was shocked to realize that it was Stoker before she could. 'Excuse me, but could we perhaps get Holloman's female press officer. He reviewed what he knew about the something to eat at your mess hall?' the voice asked.

human military, sure that they didn't have women in high positions. With

Stoker nodded as he turned, appreciating the importance of nutrition.

any other species he would have dismissed the whole thing, but human 'Of course you-' His eyes widened at the sight of the bright eyes and attitudes were usually fairly strict.

pinched but friendly face that stared out from under the white hat. 'Doctor!'

Curious as to what she was doing on the plane, Stoker approached her He snatched at his sidearm but the Doctor grabbed his arm, spinning him as she looked around curiously. 'Major Davison?' he asked suspiciously.

round and painfully into the nearest disc section. 'Run!' the Doctor called

'Yes?'

to Davison, pushing her ahead of him.

' *You* were assigned to the disc's escort?'

Davison looked startled, but ran with the departing Doctor. Stoker

'A mid to high rank was needed, and I was the only one free.'

picked himself up and swung around the disc section, aiming his

automatic at the Doctor's back. Before he could fire, a shot from Ace's

The Doctor, Ace, and Benny circled the sections, careful to keep them blaster made him duck back as it blew sparks from the terullian hull. 'Bey shu!' Stoker shouted, tapping the hard spot as the side of his neck.

blind them just long enough...' He found a suitable flare and loaded it.

Alarms began blaring across the tarmac, and blue-bereted guards 'Like this.' He fired the flare into the air over the blue berets, where it burst poured from the buildings. Alarmed at how the transport of the Doctor on with a scarlet glare, even in the desert sunlight.

the same aircraft as himself would look to his superiors, Stoker poked his

The guards immediately winced, shaking their heads. Before they

head up, heedless of the risk. Another blaster-bolt made him drop again could recover, Ace, Benny, and Marion popped up from behind the jeep as he saw the woman he didn't recognize toss the driver from an idling and opened fire on them. The guards pitched to the ground like jeep while the others piled in.

marionettes whose strings had been cut. Ace then blasted the lock on the

main gate. They darted across to the other jeep, the Doctor shaking his

Ace dropped into the recently vacated driver's seat that Benny had head as they passed the bodies of the guards.

cleared for her and gunned the engine. Several blue berets opened fire

As more sirens approached from the central area, Ace guided the jeep

with Thompsons, bullets rattling from the grille at the front of the jeep. She out of the gate.

and her passengers all ducked as she floored the accelerator and drove

through them, hurtling towards the central area of the base.

'Organize pursuit,' the cultured voice said. 'The press officer must not be

'How did they recognize you?' Benny shouted.

allowed to confirm our presence to the general population before the

'Perhaps we meet the Tzun again; in our future, if we have one. Ace, proper time.'

where are we headed?'

'As you command,' Stoker's voice echoed from the gridded panels that

'Buggered if I know!' She thought quickly. There was the open dry lake made up the chamber which was lit by the dim embers of blue fire. Olive-to the east, and hills all around. A narrow valley was visible over the roofs toned fingers called up a schematic of the area around Corman in a of the bunkers. 'There!' she pointed. 'There'll be a gate there, that we'll holosphere. 'The Doctor must be taken alive.'

reach sooner or later.'

'And Kreer? He will wish to be informed.'

'It'd better be sooner,' Marion warned, pointing behind them. Risking a

'I will notify him when he visits later today. You must return to Holloman

quick look, Ace saw another two jeeps speeding in pursuit. 'Oh smeg,' to ensure the silence of the local media in case word should leak out.'

she muttered. Taking the jeep right over a low vegetable garden, she

'As you command, First Councillor.' Stoker's voice faded from the air.

directed it down a narrow gap between two rows of prefabricated housing Violet eyes turned to meet a jet pair which gleamed impassively. 'Contact for base personnel. On the other side was a wide space with a blocky *R'Shal*. Have Councillor Tzashan appraised of this development; instruct gatehouse and several heavily barred gates. A jeep was already parked him to have a gunboat despatched to assist in the search, and Surgeon-there, with several more blue berets crouching behind it. As soon as the Major Ksal placed on stand-by.'

fugitives came into sight, the waiting guards loosed a volley of disruptor-

'As you command,' the S'Raph acknowledged in a voice like the

fire.

rustling of dead leaves.

Ace slewed the jeep around as one of the tyres exploded, and a corner

of the bonnet sloughed off in a shower of molten droplets. The jeep 'Stop here, Ace,' the Doctor commanded after only a few minutes.

skidded to a halt in the dust and the quartet threw themselves behind it.

'They'll be right on us,' Ace protested, stepping on the brakes

The other two jeeps rounded the corner and Ace opened fire at them, nevertheless. The jeep halted on a narrow road with a rocky embankment blowing chunks of hot metal from the front of them. More disruptor blasts on one side and a deep crevasse on the other.

slammed into the exposed side of the jeep, rocking it unnervingly. This

'I hope so. Chases are a waste of energy. Everybody out.' Puzzled, the

must be how Butch and Sundance felt, Ace thought.

women did as they were bid. The Doctor moved to the back of the jeep

The Doctor leaned carefully forward and scrabbled around in the jeep's and leaned against it. 'Come on, push!' Baffled, Ace joined him, and equipment box, finally settling back down with a Very pistol and a number Benny and Marion did likewise. With some effort, they pushed the jeep to of flares. Off to the right, one of the jeeps Ace was targeting exploded, the the edge, and over it. It tipped up and bounced noisily down the ravine in blast sending the other vehicle swerving into the wall of a blockhouse. a cloud of dust. The travellers watched as it came to rest about a hundred

'What are you doing?' she asked the Doctor as she ducked back into feet down. 'Now, Ace,' the Doctor went on, 'destroy it.' Beginning to cover.

suspect that she knew what he was up to, she set her blaster to maximum

'The Tzun evolved in a bluish light spectrum. Those Ph'Sor see and fired down at the mangled jeep. It exploded, consumed in a raging relatively well in this light, but if there's a red flare among this lot, it might fireball.

'Is that destroyed enough?'

'Definitely.'

'What now?' Marion asked in a trembling voice.

Chapter 11

'Now we climb that embankment and get back to Corman. It's the last

place they'll look for us.'

'Especially if they think we're toast,' Ace added, her suspicions Keeping his slablike face devoid of emotion, General Hugh Nyby, flanked confirmed.

by a pair of dark-haired air policemen, gave Kreer a nod of greeting as he

stepped out of the lift that had brought him down from the hangar that

A few minutes later, the air above the ravine shimmered with more than stored Snowbird. Although the walls of the antechamber were, like all the the rippling heat haze, and a craft with the round-nosed and swept-wing fixtures and fittings at Corman, a pale pastel blue, the thick steel door shape of a diving hawk solidified into vision as it slowed to a halt.

before them was labelled 'Blue Room'.

The pastel-lit flight deck of this vessel held a command station on a

It was odd that Kreer was able to arrive so quickly, when he had raised podium, with various other work stations arranged in a circle supposedly gone to Holloman. Snowbird could do the journey in minutes, around its base. The Ph'Sor Tzun, who had referred to himself as Xeno but to get back so quickly Kreer must have done it literally in seconds.

the Venusian, leaned forward on the podium, peering into a flat pool-like Nyby decided to watch Kreer more closely than ever.

holo-projection at his feet. It showed the burning wreckage of the jeep at

With the calm brought by routine, Nyby watched Kreer dial some digits

the bottom of the ravine, with washes of different colours flowing across on what looked like a disembowelled telephone on the wall. With some the image in succession as the sensors switched between spectra. 'Life faint hydraulic thumps and a hiss of displaced air, the door recessed itself forms?'

into the wall and slid aside.

'None in sensor focus, sir,' a crewman answered.

Beyond was a corridor illuminated not by the usual bulbs but by

'Report to First Councillor Shok'Arl that the wreckage of the

fugitives' fluorescent blue panels set into the ceiling. Nyby and the air policemen vehicle has been located. There are no survivors.;

secured small nose-plugs before entering the corridor. Other passages

Banking slightly as it hung in the air, the gunboat rippled and faded branched off to smooth doorways, but the men stuck rigidly to the well-before rising back into radar range as it moved away.

worn path they had come to know so well.

Metal panels gradually began to take over from concrete, and they

were soon walking down a metal corridor. Nyby's lunch tried to crawl back

up his throat as, with a sudden lurch, the gravity lessened by three-quarters. His footsteps barely hit the floor with enough force to make them

ring on the metal inspection panels. Beneath them, he knew, ran the web

of terullian which conducted the gravity waves, shifted ninety degrees out

of phase by a mechanism elsewhere in the bunker.

They came at last to another sealed door, before which stood two men

in plain overalls. Unlike the other Ph'Sor on the base, their long hair was

piled on their shoulders, though the searching looks that their violet eyes

gave the visitors was unnerving when compared to their angelic

appearance. As the four men approached, the pair took semi-sheltered

stances in the lee of the doorway, their disruptor rifles swinging to bear.

'Klaatu barada nikto,' Kreer announced clearly. The two guards

immediately lowered their weapons and took up 'at ease' stances to either

side. The two air policemen, whose hands had briefly dropped towards

their automatics, took up positions opposite.

Nyby and Kreer simultaneously pressed their palms onto glowing

plates to reveal a warren of gridded metal tunnels dimly illuminated with a

fierce blue light. Beyond, the air had a noticeable taint of ammonia.

Ignoring sealed iris doors, Kreer and Nyby wound their way,

'They will acclimatize the populace to the possibility of other

species.

occasionally brushing against the low ceiling in the low gravity, to a The human mind will more readily accept that which it can already claim domed chamber with a slightly concave floor. A dozen holospheres were to know something about,' Shok'Arl went on in an offhand manner. Its suspended in the centre of the room, surrounded by various open-voice hardened suddenly. 'The loss of the skiff could have severely petalled consoles of smooth black material. Half-glimpsed edges of metal jeopardized our security.'

or crystal gleamed dully all around.

'Holloman has been ordered to stand down the new array. Your pilot

Standing before one of the consoles, its attention drawn from the should have been more careful,' Nyby said, half under his breath.

holosphere it had been studying, EBE-1 turned to face its host.

'My pilots feel their craft perform,' Shok'Arl snapped, the dark pits of its

Nyby steeled himself, determined not to show any of his discomfort as eyes etching traces of anger on the back of Nyby's skull. 'Meanwhile, the five-foot olive-skinned being fixed its unblinking purple eyes upon him. what of the intruders that penetrated this base with the disc?'

Its domed head and skeletal yet strong frame reminded him of an ancient

'All the Holloman personnel will be questioned, as will the staff here,

Nosferatu film he'd once seen, while its thin lips and sharp nose gave it a though I suspect their loyalty is sincere.' It'd better be, he thought to haughty, catlike air.

himself.

As if that wasn't bad enough, something in its deep and unblinking

'Making unsubstantiated assumptions is reckless, Nyby.' Shok'Arl's

gaze seemed to suggest that it always knew exactly what he was voice sounded incredulous, as if he were responding to the carelessness thinking. Though mostly covered in a one-piece suit of some smooth grey of a child. 'However,' it added in a more conciliatory tone, 'the probability material, small plastic panels were set into its torso here and there. Slim is that you are correct.' The alien paused, the single muscle in the centre tubes and hoses ran to and from the plastic implants, circulating the of its chin pulling the middle of its lower lip down in what Nyby had come oxygenated - or whatever their equivalent was, Nyby reminded himself - to recognize as a Tzun smile. 'I have seen the distress you and your fluid through its body, a vital element of its survival in Earth's higher peers sense at

the loss of your men,' it confided softly. 'My pilots are also gravity and atmospheric pressure. Further empty implant sockets in its warriors whom I respect and am proud to command. It also distresses me abdomen, intended for nutrition and waste recycling when in cryogenic when any of them die without purpose and without honour.'

sleep on long space voyages, gaped like open wounds.

Nyby stood for a moment, surprised at Shok'Arl's admission. Perhaps

Slim cables along the backs of its hands vanished under the knuckles we aren't all that different, he thought. 'I understand,' he replied quietly.

to support delicate movements under the higher gravity, while With a formal salute, he turned to depart the way he had come.

displacements in the one-piece suit betrayed similar aids at the other joints. It had told him all these things in a matter-of-fact tone that had Kreer listened for the sounds of Nyby and his men leaving before turning convinced Nyby utterly. It hadn't forced the view on him through shouting back to Shok'Arl. 'About the matter for which *R'Shal* beamed me back or examples because, Nyby was sure, this was not a creature that felt the here...' he offered eagerly, suspiciously eyeing a pair of S'Raph who had need to prove anything.

arrived to monitor the consoles and holospheres.

An implant in the creature's neck sparked as it spoke. 'What have you

'The Doctor and his friends were here. Their vehicle has been

discovered about the crash of our skiff?' Shok'Arl, First Councillor of the destroyed, but I consider it wise to assume they have survived to return Tzun Confederacy, asked simply. Its voice was rich, cultured and here surreptitiously.' The alien moved into a smaller chamber, in which multitonal, having been sampled from a selection of the best speakers of one wall was dominated by a world display. Its movements were casual Earth's broadcasters. Its tone was firm yet reasonable and understanding.

and smooth, despite the misleading appearance of its support system.

Nyby smiled weakly, trying to look suitably wise and benevolent. 'It was 'His tactics are entirely within expectations. He is not a serious threat.'

caused by an experimental phased radar array, which was exacerbated

Kreer nodded thoughtfully, strolling in with his hands folded over his

by unexpected atmospheric conditions. The ship has just arrived here.'

belt. 'You encountered him before, didn't you? He interfered with your

'The skiff was guarded by Holloman people,' Kreer added. 'A heavy plans then.'

Ph'Sor concentration might have been suspicious.'

Shok'Arl looked into thin air, its eyes unfocused, as if living another life

'That is within acceptable parameters,' Shok'Arl agreed. 'Our presence under hypnotic regression. 'Twelve hundred and twenty-four Terran years must not be revealed until the scheduled time.'

ago, his intercession in the colonization of the second planet in the

'Then why are we continually seeing reports of your "space brothers" in Mimosa system led to the abandonment of our operations there. His the headlines?' Nyby asked in spite of himself.

actions were directly responsible for the loss of the Stormblade *Ksorn*,

along with Councillor R'Kyth and the complete expeditionary force. This is epicanthic eyes; the smooth hairlessness of the skin, as well as the fragile well known to you.'

limbs and high domed head, were just like those of the pure-blood

'There is a human truism you may or may not be aware of, Shok'Arl - Shok'Arl.

once bitten, twice shy.'

'Is the next jamming exercise prepared?'

'Continue.'

'Surface events have not affected aerial operations. The duties of the

'Wouldn't it be wise to let me eliminate the Doctor as soon as skiff which crashed have been reassigned to a reserve vessel. All possible?' Kreer asked with a silky hunger in his voice. 'Not least to operations remain on schedule as per the mission briefing.'

preclude the possibility of a repeat occurrence of his interference. Nothing

'What are the preliminary results of the exercises so far?'

else could prevent it, I assure you.'

'The skiffs have relayed telemetry on all human military vehicles

'Your reasoning is sound,' Shok'Arl conceded, 'as far as it goes. All engaged in aerospace manoeuvring. Tactical analyses of this data by strategies employed by all parties involved at Mimosa II have been *R'Shal*'s strategy computer indicates that all vehicles depend in some part analysed and incorporated into the Tzun central tactical database. Our on electromagnetic propagation by either carrier wave signal or electron procedures and technology have progressed exponentially

since then, as flow. Both of these can be disrupted globally, with a projected human has our culture. We never,' it added more firmly, 'make the same mistake casualty rate of approximately fifteen thousand individuals who may be twice. All possible measures the Doctor can take have been projected airbourne at zero hour.'

and countered.' It moved to a low console, brining a DNA chain into view

'Projected casualties from warhead detonation?'

in the nearest holosphere. Several strands glowed an icy blue in chill

'Approximately six hundred thousand in Washington DC, and four

contrast to the warmer tones of the remainder.

hundred thousand in Moscow.'

Kreer stared at it with longing, his breath shortening. The display was

Shok'Arl nodded. It was unfortunate, but a necessary evil that they

both the pot of gold at then end of his rainbow, and the albatross around would just have to live with. 'A mere zero point zero zero two five percent his neck.

of planetary population is an acceptable casualty rate. Order a suitable

'As you see,' Shok'Arl continued, 'we are keeping to our side of the aircraft to be taken as a prize of war.'

bargain. Our genetic strategists have isolated the DNA corruption. You

must therefore keep to your side of the bargain. Should you endanger us Three guards patrolled the open compound in front of the gate at Corman, in any way, we will be forced to neutralize such a threat.' Kreer ignored the area permanently shadowed by the looming mountains. Their pace the implication, looking down at the misshapen gloves he wore. Better was steady, even and measured; you could probably set your watch by dead than non-sapient, he thought. 'I will permit no deviation from the them.

plan,' Shok'Arl went on, 'and no dishonour to our forces.'

All of which made it easier for Ace, Benny, and the Doctor to rise up

'I can sympathize with that,' Kreer lied glibly. The Tzun turned away, from behind a jeep, falling into step behind the guards in time to put them busying itself at the console. Realizing that the audience was over, Kreer out of action. Almost as one, Ace clubbed one with the hilt of her blaster, left the room, his face a barely controlled rictus of disgusted anger. Better Benny swung one around by the shoulder to deliver a roundhouse punch dead than non-sapient, he reminded himself, but better still alive and that would have felled a charging

bull, and the Doctor applied a half-avenged. 'Deviation,' he thought; Shok'Arl doesn't even know the remembered Venusian Aikido strike to the last.

meaning of the word. He left, consoling himself with the delicious

'I'd almost forgotten how difficult that is with only two arms,' he malevolence of that thought.

muttered as they dragged the unconscious bodies into the rocks, where

Marion was trying on a helmet that had rolled away from one of the Alone, Shok'Arl brought a red line onto the world map. Punctuated by guards they had fought on the way out.

Tzun glyphs, it linked Washington DC and Moscow. In one corner, a

'How many should you have?' Ace asked, always curious about

countdown flickered downwards in hexadecimal notation. 'Technician,' it different modes of combat.

called.

'For Venusian Aikido? Five; and five legs as well.'

'First Councillor?' one of the S'Raph replied, stepping into the room.

A few moments later, four uniformed figures marched into the base's

When seen together, the relationship between the S'Raph and the pure—

grounds, dark hair carefully hidden by their helmets. 'Where are we blood was clearer. Although the technician's abdominal area was going?' Marion asked.

atrophied, and he had no nose to speak of, grey skin and large black

'The base commander's office, if we can find it,' the Doctor replied.

As they skirted the concrete walls that grew out of the mountains, - most likely a subcutaneous receiver plugged directly into the cerebral Benny indicated the Guppy, which was now being refuelled. 'That could cortex.' He straightened with a grim look. 'We're too late here. The Tzun be our ticket back out of here.'

have complete control of this base. Someone has been out-thinking us

'Probably,' the Doctor agreed. He pointed upwards at the underside of every step of the way. Or out-thinking me, anyway.'

the large parabolic dish. 'I wonder what this is for. An Air Force base is

'Sauce for the goose,' Ace muttered from the door.

hardly used for radio-astronomy, and it can hardly be used for

satellite

The Doctor grunted and moved over to the single photograph on the

tracking or downlinks, for obvious reasons.'

wall. 'Very odd,' he muttered, and twitched it aside. Behind it was the

'That just leaves the one answer then,' Ace pointed out.

metal fascia of a safe. 'I thought as much.' He pressed his ear to the steel

'Yes,' the Doctor replied, raising his eyes heavenward.

and gently twiddled the dial to and fro.

Removing his ear from the metal with an 'Aha' of triumph, the Doctor

A large pair of doors were set into the concrete wall just ahead, with a row swung the heavy metal slab aside. Inside, several small pouches and of dark windows on either side and a sign above that identified this as an boxes sat atop a heavy wad of paper. Lifting the lot out, he leafed through administration block. Going in, it took Ace only a few seconds to find a the papers with a crestfallen look. 'Orders in the event of war, how terribly map of the base pinned to one pale blue wall and memorize a route to the dull; logistics, boring; manpower and efficiency reports, useless,' he CO's office. She then led them through the base, which was strangely grumbled, tossing the papers back into the safe with careless disinterest.

deserted. 'The Tzun will all be happier in the underground complex,' the 'Wait a minute...' He unfolded a plastic map. Marion recognized the Doctor explained, 'where they can have an artificial environment of their features of New Mexico immediately. The Tzun insignia was repeated choice. There can't be that many humans left here.'

here and there at certain locations. Dates were beside them. 'October

They finally came to an office with General Nyby's name on the pane 7th/8th - Elephant Butte reservoir,' the Doctor read aloud. 'That's tonight.'

of glass in the door. The foursome slipped inside, the Doctor using a

'A visit from the Tzun?'

downward-pointing motion to indicate that Ace should watch the door.

'Looks that way.' He stuffed the map in a pocket and unfolded another

Ace nodded, and stood at the door as if on guard. The others went into sheet. 'This is more interesting; logistics logs for two medium-

yield the office proper.

weapons to be shipped to Washington DC.'

The room was very spartan, with walls and ceiling of the same blue

'Why send them there?' Marion asked. 'And why send two bombs from

shade as everywhere else on the base. Something to do with the Tzuns' Holloman instead of using Corman's own?'

having developed on a planet with a blue spectrum, Marion assumed.

'To confuse the trail, obviously. Look at this,' he added, unrolling Damn, she thought, they've got me at it now. There was only a single another acetate map. It was a small world map, with Washington and decorative photograph, of the bomber Enola Gay. Behind the desk was Moscow marked in red. 'They know who runs the two main sides on this the thickset form of an Air Force general.

planet.' He opened a rectangular mahogany box. Inside was a pearl-Marion was surprised to see Nyby slouched at his desk, staring handled Colt. 'Second-rate souvenirs,' he muttered, slamming the box unseeingly at a sheaf of papers as if switched off. The thought of an shut. Frowning, he hefted a small velvet pouch whose contents rattled officer so zombie-like in his own base was sickening, she thought sharply. 'Can't be a dice bag; he doesn't look the Dungeons and Dragons disgustedly. The Doctor and Benny exchanged a knowing look, as if they type.' He tipped the pouch up impulsively, emptying the contents into his had expected this. Marion didn't doubt for a moment that this was the hand.

case; that was what intelligence services were for, after all. She watched

'Ace,' Ace whispered.

as the Doctor moved quickly over, feeling for a pulse. 'He's alive,' he

'Not even a top brass-hat gets paid that much,' Marion admitted

commented. He waved his hand in front of the general's face several admiringly.

times, without any reaction from Nyby.

'No,' the Doctor agreed, stirring the small multi-faceted crystals with a

'The lights are on but nobody's home,' Benny quipped. The Doctor forefinger. They were of varied colours, and a flawless diamond the size tipped Nyby's head gently forward and to the side. A red weal glistened of an ant was the least valuable. 'I have to admit to surprise at more than stickily at the back of his neck.

the value of the gems, though,' the Doctor confessed, holding up a

'What happened to him?' Marion asked in revulsion.

sugarcube-sized gem of scarlet. 'Andromedan Bloodstone. And as for

'The Tzun have taken steps to ensure that their host doesn't become this...' He lifted out a vibrant green gem. 'Oolion is unique to Collactin. It too rebellious. Nyby's been given some kind of behavioural limiter implant used to exist on Bandraginus Five as well, but that was destroyed by Zanak about eighty years ago.'

'The Doctor! Seal the base; red alert!' He turned and ran back the way

'Obviously the Tzun brought them,' Benny said.

he had come, while dozens of men rushed from the bunker complex

'No. Bandraginus Five was a shipyard for the Vegans; I was on Zanak around him.

in 1978, and it certainly wasn't a Tzun colony; and Collactin orbits a red

supergiant star, and also has unsurvivable radiation levels, even for the Ace and Benny watched as the Doctor and Marion vanished into the Tzun.'

Guppy's hold seconds before the blue-bereted guards appeared. Ace

'What are we dealing with, then?' Ace demanded. 'Two separate alien looked around the corner of the white-roofed hangar beside her, while factions?'

jeeps zoomed out from the mountain-enclosed compound. Once they

'Maybe,' the Doctor said doubtfully. 'If so, they're covering their tracks were past, she slipped out around the corner and jogged across the extremely well.' He looked crossly around the room as if trying to conjure dispersal area at the edge of the dry lake, Benny following close behind.

up a living example of their mysterious adversaries. 'I get the feeling that I

Ahead, a large four-engined Hercules transport, looking patchy as the

should know.'

sunlight reflected off the differently grained metal panels of its unpainted

'Motion seconded,' Benny interrupted, breaking the mood.

fuselage, sat on the wide expanse of gridded tarmac. The plane was

'Come on,' the Doctor ordered. He pulled himself up to his full height, connected to a tanker truck by a series of hoses, and the rear ramp and such as it was, and made for the door.

both doors on the nearer side of the fuselage were open. A couple

of men

'Where to?' Ace prompted.

in overalls were climbing in and out.

'In your case and Benny's, Washington DC.' Hunting around in his Ace grinned, almost purring, as she watched the men disconnect the

pockets - which both women had occasionally suspected might be just as first of the fuel lines.

dimensionally transcendent as the TARDIS itself - he handed over the

'You must be joking,' Benny hissed as they dropped behind some

slim radiation probe he usually carried. 'You're the weapons expert,' he drums a few yards from the activity around the plane. 'You can't hijack a told her, 'so you should be able to work out where to look for those two crukking military transport! What are you going to do? Stick a gun in the warheads.'

pilot's ear and say "take us to Cuba"?'

'And defuse them?' Ace asked with an eager smile.

'Course not.'

'Meaning no insult to your professional capabilities,' the Doctor

'Thank God for that.'

answered hastily, 'no. Turn them over to the proper authorities, and

'I'm going to nick it before the pilot arrives.'

please try not to blow anything up.'

'What?! Don't tell me you can fly one of those things?'

'Where will you be while we're re-enacting *Thunderball*?' Benny asked.

'I flew the occasional assault hopper in Spacefleet; how much different

'Now that we have a time and place for a Tzun fly-past, I'll get Marion can this be?' Ignoring the mask of horror on Benny's face, Ace moved as back to New Mexico and arrange a suitable reception. If I can get hold of the men disappeared around the tail-ramp to disconnect the fuel lines on an operational Tzun ship...' He strode out the door with seemingly the other side.

boundless energy. 'Marion and I can stow away on the Guppy again for its

'I'm going to regret this,' Benny muttered. They raced across the return flight. I assume you two have enough ingenuity to get to baking tarmac and up the three-stepped door set into the lower port side Washington on your own?'

just behind the cockpit. Throwing a quick glance through the aft bulkhead

'It's just possible,' Benny replied dryly.

to check that there was no one in the cargo bay, Ace pulled herself up

Outside, a man passed the end of the duck-egg blue corridor and into the cockpit. A red-headed engineer turned from monitoring the flow of glanced round with surprise. He just managed to hit the alarm before Ace fuel. 'What the hell?'

shot him.

'Excuse me,' Ace said in her most businesslike tone, 'but does this

crate have enough fuel to get us to Cuba?' Benny groaned aloud.

Stoker pounded swiftly on his way to the Blue Room with a strong

'Sure, I-' A rabbit-punch from Ace doubled him over enough for her to

demand in his mind, when the alarm stopped him. His consternation over grab him by the scruff of the neck and toss him head-first out of the hatch.

the photograph and his emotions all vanished as his professionalism 'Don't forget to tell them when you wake up, nanoceph,' she muttered, came to the fore. 'What's happening?' he called over the communicator ducking into the cockpit.

network.

The sight of the array of glass-faced dials under the large windscreen

'Intruder alert! Nyby's office has been penetrated.'

almost stopped her in her tracks. Trying not to give away any sign of

distress that might alarm Benny, she scanned the dials with what she onto the long runway that bisected the dry lake. 'Strap yourself in,' Ace hoped was an inscrutably professional air as she dropped into the left-shouted over the roar of the engines.

hand seat.

For once, she was glad of what the Doctor - or Benny, for that matter - Stoker took the tower steps three at a time, leaping through the door like would have referred to as typical military lack of imagination. The Superman from a phone booth. 'Block the runway,' he ordered.

technology may have changed a lot in half a millenium, but the general

The tower staff looked at him dumbly. 'With another plane?' the tower

layout of where the major instruments were located on the panel had controller ventured. 'That would be an unacceptable waste of resources-'

remained fairly constant. It didn't take her more than a few

moments to
Stoker grimaced, a dull ache of rage fading in behind his eyes. 'Block
map out the important ones in her mind. She tossed aside a clipboard the *kshar* runway!'
flight plan that marked out a route to Hawaii.
'Since the tanks are full, the pilot will probably be on his way.' She 'Holy shit,' Ace hissed, indicating what was was occurring at the end of handed Benny her blaster. 'Go and close the door we came in, and the the runway.
one in the cargo bay. If anyone sees you, zap 'em.'
Benny looked up from checking the security of her harness in the co-
'Jesus,' Benny muttered, but went nevertheless. As she went, Ace pilot's seat, and froze. 'Amen to that,' she whispered, looking at Ace and operated the lever that closed the rear ramp. With a hum of hydraulic half-willing her to turn back.
power, it began rising back into the tailplane.
Ahead, growing rapidly larger as they approached, a B-57 twin-jet
On the runway to the side, the Guppy hurled itself into the air, bomber was taxiing onto the runway, forming a horrifyingly effective prompting Ace to smile to herself, knowing that the Doctor and Marion barricade. Benny watched Ace's knuckles whiten on the semi-circular were safely on board. Thumbing the switches on the overhead panel, she control yoke, her other hand pushing the throttled levers forward. 'Might I started the propellers turning; slow at first, they rapidly gained speed. Like suggest a speedy right turn?'
a thoroughbred stamping at the ground before a race, the huge aircraft
'The hell we will,' Ace said grimly. 'That's what they want. They don't
strained forward against the chocks.
know all the short-haul Spacefleet tricks, though.'
Benny declined to comment on how certain she was that Ace knew
Knowing that he would need the best possible vantage point, Stoker equally little about the performance capabilities of the aircraft she was made for the control tower, which was mounted on a rocky promontory. currently stealing.
He had barely spared a glance for the Hercules being refuelled, but when
The B-57 drew to a halt across the runway, expanding as quickly as
its engines spluttered into life, his head snapped round.
the distance between them shrank. As the dry lake around them

blurred

Reading the situation in that instant, he waved a jeep full of blue berets with speed, Benny saw the startled faces of the B-57 crew for a subliminal in the direction of the plane, and bolted for the tower.

instant before they sprinted away from their craft. The surface of the bomber was a black wall filling more and more of the forward view.

Having pulled shut the hatch through which they had entered, Benny now Backed by the rumbling vibration of the surging engines, Ace howled a glanced out the rear crew door as the plane lurched over the wooden Daak-style war cry as she hauled back on the yoke.

chocks and began to turn onto the runway. The engineer Ace had tossed

With a snap, a blinding flash seared Benny's eyes. Her heart seemed

out clambered to his feet and waved frantically at the turning plane.

to stop, as if assuming she had just been killed in an ensuing explosive

A jeep appeared from the far side of a nearby hangar, aiming for the collision.

plane. Someone in the passenger seat began firing with a handgun, the

spang of the bullet impacts coming an instant before the crack of the From nothing like a safe distance, the bomber crew watched the Hercules shots being fired. Benny shot back at the jeep, blowing one of its tyres lurch into the air far earlier than it should have been able to.

out. The jeep skidded off into the dry lake bed in a billowing cloud.

Its lowered undercarriage smashed into the trailing edge of the

Ducking back inside, she hauled the door down on its rollers and bomber's port wing before ripping along the top of its fuselage. As the secured it with the small locking wheel.

Hercules clawed its way into the air at a dangerously steep angle, its

Rushing back to the cockpit, she paused to examine one of the starboard main wings sheared off, the bomber spun under the impact. Its containers stacked on a pallet in the hold. Troubled, she went forward to port landing leg snapped under the torque stress placed on it, and the find Ace grappling with the throttle levers as she steered the heavy plane plane sagged groundwards.

Its idling port engine crumpled as the wing hit the ground, and

'The women? What about the Doctor?'

exploded in a shower of sparks which immediately ignited its breached

'There was no guy there,' the engineer chipped in.

wing tanks and its own bomb load.

'He must still be here. Cuba? What possible reason could they... Never

The bomber disappeared in a golden flash.

mind, it's exactly the clue we need. Contact Aerospace Defense

The crew ignored the rain of red-hot fragments that fell around them, Command. Give them any story you can think of, but get fighters up from just glad that it hadn't been loaded with nuclear warheads.

every station between here and the Gulf of Mexico.' Without needing to

Benny opened her eyes cautiously, realizing that the flare in front of wait for an acknowledgement, Stoker stepped back from the windows and them had been the sun as the plane tilted up to take off steeply. 'I don't tapped the right side of his neck. 'H'shar moch,' he snapped.

believe it,' she breathed. 'It worked.'

As the engineer's eyes widened in horror, Stoker was enveloped in a

'Yeah,' Ace nodded, her face looking strained and tired. 'Surprised the swirling red glow. When it faded, he was gone.

hell out of me too.' The world tilted gently as Ace took the plane onto a

No one else reacted. When the red-haired engineer noticed that the

new course. 'You ever fly any atmosphere craft?'

tower crew were looking from him to the sergeant, he turned round slowly.

'Just skimmers with a joystick and three read-outs.'

The sergeant's gun was levelled at him, unwavering.

'But you could hold this steady and on-course?'

'Definitely,' Benny affirmed in a no-nonsense tone.

Ace ducked through the low bulkhead door and into the cargo hold,

'Good, take over.' Benny grabbed the yoke on her side as Ace wondering what Benny was so concerned about. A number of rounded unbuckled herself. With an envious look at Ace's freedom, Benny tugged containers were clamped to a cargo pallet to prevent them tumbling one-handedly at the restrictive straps - the Air Force very obviously had around, but the lids were merely padlocked.

yet to see the wisdom of designing planes for pilots with breasts.

This was no barrier to Ace, who simply cut the padlock free with a

Ace, meanwhile, was rooting around under the instrument panel while narrow-beam setting from her blaster. Opening the nearest lid, she lifted occasionally checking a graphic on her wrist computer. After a few the polystyrene foam free with a frown. She couldn't swear to it, but she moments of contortionism, she thumped at something and then suspected that this stuff hadn't been invented yet - or, at least, not straightened up with a small piece of primitive electronics in her hand. developed for this purpose. What was underneath, ensconced in a white Searching her pockets for an interface lead, she finally found one that womb, made her forget about her concerns over mere packaging.

would connect the computer jack to a socked on the instrument panel.

Cradles securely were several short and stubby, yet unmistakably rifle-

'Now we no longer exist,' she announced as she connected them up.

like devices. 'Shades!' she hissed. Ace teased one out and hefted it,

'They'll be after us any time,' Benny warned.

finding that a replacable power cell was hidden in the stock. The weapon

'Want a bet? That engineer will tell them I asked about Cuba, so they'll was clearly not at the same level of technology as her blaster or the scramble interceptors south and southeast of here while we head north various Tzun articles, and the simplicity of its single power level was proof and dog-leg around Salt Lake City. And since I've just altered our enough that it was no sonic disruptor.

transponder signal, we don't have to worry about radar either.'

Field-stripping the weapon was relatively simple, and Ace entered its

'There is another inconvenience.'

schematics into her wrist computer as she did so. It was a puzzling device

'Such as?'

that was designed around circuitry for drawing on electrical power and

'Do you know what we're carrying?'

generating magnetic fields. Ace's soldierly mind was already drawing

'Not as such, no.'

shrewd conclusions.

'Go and take a look,' Benny suggested.

To be certain, however, she had her wrist computer analyse its

schematics. Its conclusions tallied with hers precisely. 'It never rains but it

Stoker turned away from the sloped windows with a sharp spin that pours.' She returned to the cockpit worriedly.

betrayed his irritation. 'Track their course,' he ordered.

'Well?' Benny asked as Ace settled back into her seat. 'More imported

'Sorry, sir,' a technician apologized, 'there are no radar traces with the technology?'

Hercules's transponder code.'

Ace nodded. 'Phased plasma rifles. They shoot a blast of

'The Doctor is as resourceful as we were told. What now?' Stoker electromagnetic energy at you and fry you in your shoes.'

asked of a Blue Beret sergeant, who had brought in a dazed engineer.

'Tzun know-how, presumably. The plasma rifle wasn't invented on

'He says the two women asked about Cuba,' the sergeant explained.

Earth until 2024.'

Ace shrugged, happy to leave the dates and places to Benny. 'Well,

'I said all along,' Stoker said calmly, 'that a strike from orbit would-'

we've got about nine hours to figure out what to do with them.'

'Would be both needlessly wasteful of resources,' Tzashan interrupted,

'Nine hours? It's only a couple of thousand miles, Ace! The sound 'and a potential risk to the operation should the fall-out effects be barrier had been broken by now, surely.'

analysed before negotiations with the United Nations were completed.

'Yeah, but definitely not in heaps like this.'

The Earth's resources must be assimilated into the Confederacy intact,

They stayed wrapped in their thoughts for a while, as the Hercules and with respect to our foes.'

drifted into a wraithlike thin cloud.

'That is the greater honour,' Sr'Shol reminded Stoker.

'Then at least let me deal with the Doctor.'

Higher, farther, beyond the coldest fringes of atmosphere, something

'Logically, the Doctor will have returned to Holloman by the same huge sailed the invisible currents of gravity. Moored at the edge of the aircraft he arrived on. Did you think to check it?'

pool of Earth's gravity well, the long and sharp form gleamed with

Stoker looked sideways at them. It was an obvious move for the reflections of unfiltered sunlight. Its hull the shape of the blade of a short-Doctor, yet one which it was inconceivable that he would be stupid sword, a hangar deck was the guard over the fiery engines that were its enough to make. Of course Stoker hadn't checked. 'Well...'

hilt. A ventral power nacelle trailed at the end of a pylon on the other side

'Precisely. We projected this course of action, and its fruition proves

from the hangar deck. The harsh yellow-white light glinting dangerously that our analysis of the Doctor's strategic pattern is accurate. For this from the edges of her hull, the Tzun Stormblade *R'Shal* hung silently in reason, he is no serious threat to us. He will come to us at the correct orbit like a global sword of Damocles.

time,' Tzashan finished ambivalently.

In the darkened war room, several diminutive S'Raph were perched on

'And the women?' Stoker asked resignedly.

spotlit stools around a circular holotank as Stoker entered. Halting

'They are merely human, and so of no danger to us,' Sr'Shol replied.

between a pair of S'Raph, he looked towards the three slightly more

'When the final phase is completed,' Tzashan put in flatly, 'they will

normal chairs on the far side. The centre seat was empty, but Tzashan simply be two more subjects of the new regime ready for processing.'

and Sr'Shol occupied the other two.

'Very well. If you're right about where they're heading, the Ph'Sor

'Report,' the two pure-blood Tzun states simultaneously, their troops on station will kill them.'

translator implants remaining dark.

'That is within acceptable operational parameters,' Sr'Shol agreed. The

'The threat assessment on the Doctor has been borne out. He and his spotlights illuminating the two of them dimmed. Ignoring the Stormblade's friends have made contact with Nyby. His companions have taken an S'Raph command crew, Stoker left without another word.

aircraft and escaped; we believe the Doctor is still on the base and we're

searching for him. The stolen aircraft had a consignment of phased When the door irised closed behind Stoker, the spotlights came on

again.

plasma rifles on board, so the humans may feel we have betrayed them The captain rose from his stool to face the two members of the by not delivering.' He paused to smile reassuringly, like a sponsor's expedition's ruling triumvirate. 'Not warning him against further pursual of spokesman on local TV. 'We know where the women are headed, of the Doctor could prove dangerous for the operation,' the captain pointed course. I'm having interceptors scrambled, but I'd prefer to supplement out.

that with our vessels.'

'First Councillor Shok'Arl gave the order,' Tzashan said. 'Stoker is as

'That will not be necessary,' Tzashan stated dismissively, which yet too closely associated with our Major Kreer, and may prejudice irritated Stoker. 'The aircraft's course has been projected?'

Kreer's actions if he were to let slip our intentions for the Doctor. The

'A witness reports that they spoke of heading southeast.'

Doctor must not die.'

'Tactically unsound,' the pure-bloods snapped together.

'As you command.' The captain led his officers from the war room with

'If Nyby's office was breached,' Tzashan went on, 'the Doctor will have the spindly grace of a hunting spider.

had access to both the movement orders for the warheads and the When the last of the pantropic spacers had gone, the Tzun left their

schedule for the next jamming exercise. He will wish to face us, and so seats, strolling over to the central holotank. Set into the floor of this was a will return to New Mexico. If he is not on the aircraft, however, then it must wide circular plaque, ten feet in diameter, inscribed with the Precepts laid be on its way to Washington DC to locate the warheads.'

down by R'Shal when he founded the Confederacy. Identical plaques

'The females will have anticipated your questioning of the witness,' were installed in the war rooms of every Stormblade in the Tzun Starfleet.

Sr'Shol added grimly. 'They will attempt to defuse the warheads.'

Tzashan stared thoughtfully down at the second section of the spiralling

inscription, and privately wondered how it could be applied to the Doctor.

'Data retrieval,' he said eventually. 'Councillor Tzashan; enablement code

173467321476C32789777643T732V731178887324767897643 76
lock.'

Chapter 12

'It will be a difficult operation,' Sr'Shol commented.

'The act of meeting the challenge strengthens us. We must abide by

the sacred Precepts; if we are forced to eliminate the Doctor then we With Stoker remaining at Corman, the Doctor and Marion were able to have lost an important battle with ourselves and are dishonoured.'

join the guards from Holloman in the small passenger compartment once

'Then what do we do to prevent that?'

the Guppy had taken off. The guards had seemed surprised to see them,

'The second Precept states that he who knows his enemy as well as having thought they were staying behind, but at least they were human.

himself need not fear the result of a hundred battles. We must know the

Marion had asked around, and found that they had been secluded in

Doctor, as well as project from analyses of his past actions. His splitting of the plane and had not seen anything that went on outside once the disc the party should have been foreseen.'

had been unloaded. Wondering what exactly Corman's staff had to hide,

'The women will not succeed in defusing the warheads, therefore they Marion looked across to see the Doctor sitting with a concerned look on are irrelevant.'

his face.

'That is correct, but their course of action is a clear warning.'

'Corman have gone renegade, haven't they?' she asked.

'Security clearance and voiceprint identification confirmed,' *R'Shal*'s

'Not exactly. Some of them aren't human. It's a few hours back to computer announced.

Holloman, and you probably need to rest,' he added meaningfully.

'Import file Kreer alpha-zero-one, relative date 7101.02; subject the

'Right.' As if she could sleep, she thought.

Doctor.' Tzashan remained unperturbed, not wasting even the tiniest

amount of energy, as the air above the plaque thickened and swirled with The regular squeaking of the rusted sign above the

barbershop door colour. In an instant, a column stretched up before them, a metal building across the road barely brushed Robert Agar's awareness. Basking in the solidly within. Fields were visible beyond, distorted as if they were fare gently cooling desert breeze that wafted across the porch, he mulled over below, while blue skies were wrapped around the image.

the invitation which lay on a table in the lounge. Although the sheet was in

'Use of ship's energy is superfluous,' Sr'Shol stated darkly. 'RNA another room, he could clearly see every word in his mind.

samples should have been assimilated as standard.'

He didn't particularly fear ridicule - one could get used to that, as he

'Shok'Arl did not want to risk contamination of the gene pool by the had long since discovered - and nor was he particularly shy. It was just assimilation of artificially corrupted material,' Tzashan reminded him that his friends - hell, even his family, he admitted honestly - might think without rancour. Although the ship had plenty of energy to spare, Tzashan him crazy. Perhaps he could convince them he was out for the money the sympathized with Sr'Shol's opinion. Having more of something didn't TV station was offering, he thought hopefully. They might believe that, mean you had to use it faster. 'Computer, initiate action.'

since he had been bitter about losing on that game show he'd been on a

In front of his wide purple eyes, a tall man came into view and peered couple of years back. He wondered what his employers would think, if through a crack between the door and the metal wall. His lined face was they felt their finance clerk was either a moneygrubber - occupational surmounted by an unruly mass of tousled white hair, which was writhing hazard, he thought blackly - or a crazy man.

in the wind. His red velvet jacket was almost totally obscured by a flowing

On the other hand, he mused, not getting the story off his chest might

black cape of some kind.

drive him crazy.

Scrutinizing a dimly visible metal cylinder which was balanced on a

The sign's squeaking blended gently from one gust of breeze into the

wire attached to the door, he wore a look of intense concentration. Taking next, leading his thoughts form one to the next and allowing no time to a deep breath, he whipped open the door and hurled

himself through.

listen to the cicadas in the yard. To a certain extent Agar felt proprietorial

towards the Venusians. They had specifically chosen him, after all, and

his mind skittered nervously round the prospect of sharing them with thousands or even millions of viewers.

'Tell your people about us,' the wind seemed to whisper in the strange

accentless voice. Agar started but immediately relaxed, recognizing the

memory for what it was. 'What the hell,' he decided, and went in to make

a phone call.

Soviets pretended to be our allies against Hitler.

'How could anyone get hold of one of these?'

Corman's S-Four area was a linked series of smooth-walled and blue-

'Another crash?'

painted concrete caverns supported by massive shock absorbers buried

'Besides, I'm the best there is in this field.'

deep under the foundations. Although it had been constructed as a

'In the world?'

prototype for the Strategic Air Command headquarters that was being

'Are there any research or educational facilities better than MIT, built at Cheyenne mountain, this complex had been reassigned to a quite CalTech or Los Alamos in eastern Europe or the far east?' Marlowe different task. Not all of the maintenance equipment dotted around was of smiled engagingly.

the solid and sturdy mechanical design favoured by humanity. Small

'For all our sakes, I hope not,' Nyby growled, unimpressed by

drones floated past on repulsorlift fields, while strangely designed Marlowe's attempts to invoke patriotism into the equation. These compressors occasionally jetted scented gases into the air. Spotlights scientists were all brotherhood of man-type philosophers anyway, he shone from impossibly slim and stalky mountings, their light oily on the thought. What did they know?

surface of the reassembled disc. Strange hums and buzzes filled the air.

'There you are, General,' Kreer's voice interrupted. The major

emerged

Nyby eyed the maw of the open disc hatch with a certain amount of from the lift to the Blue Room, a pair of hydraulic doors slamming closed distaste, unable to distance his thoughts from the conclusion that it behind him. 'I have been *ordered*,' he spoke the word in an almost shared the same disconcerting gaze as its owners. Turning his back on amused tone, 'to attend a Presidential briefing in Washington. I suggest the disc that had an aura of the poisonous danger of the quicksilver it that you assign a jeep from the motor pool for my journey to rendezvous resembled, he watched Marlowe and his team scurry around like worker with Snowbird.'

ants. Their attention was clearly on the twin of Snowbird which had been

'And your responsibility for this...' Nyby indicated the disc.

delivered from Holloman. Striding over to Marlowe, Nyby indicated the

'I'm sure you'll be able to maintain suitable security arrangements for a

ship with a nod, and tried not to shudder as a long-armed drone floated national defence program of this importance,' Kreer stated encouragingly, serenely past in mid-air. Marlowe watched it with a predatory look, fingers patting Nyby's shoulder with gross insolence.

twitching towards the jeweller's screwdriver set in his pocket.

'Leave everything to me-' Nyby began through gritted teeth, wondering

'How much of it do you understand yet?' Nyby asked, trying to sound what Kreer was trying to imply. He stopped, however, as he glared angrily as if he knew as much as anyone could. This time, however, it was much at Kreer's hand on his shoulder. The fire faded from his eyes as the fear more to reassure himself than to keep Marlowe on his toes.

that Shok'Arl inspired crept back, drawn by the sight of the exposed inch

'Assembling the sections is easy enough, though the central gears they or two of Kreer's wrist between glove and sleeve.

latch onto have a set of ratios I can't work out at all. Nor do I understand

It was not the sight of his skin that disturbed Nyby, for none was how the segments adhere to each other. As for the circuitry or even the visible. Instead, a smooth layer of downy brown fur emerged briefly from materials used in its construction, we haven't a prayer of figuring it out.'

the uniform cloth before vanishing back under the black leather.

Nyby recalled that his farmer father had always taught him that

there

was nothing that could not be solved with the application of hard work. It Its hull glittering like a sliver of green ice in the chill vacuum of high orbit, was an ethos he had applied to everything, and Nyby felt the same way. 'I the Stormblade *R'Shal* was more alive with activity than any Terran would have thought a partially dissassembled craft would have given you anthill.

a better idea of its internal mechanisms,' he said dangerously.

In a spotless and sterile chamber at the heart of the ship, directly

'With a human-built craft maybe. This has been no more help than the below the war room, the limited microgravity that served the rest of the original Snowbird was.'

ship was inactive. The medial cleanrooms were the only areas of the ship

'That is not a good enough answer, Doctor,' Nyby rumbled. The - apart from the hangar deck which opened to space - not to have any art-nervousness that Shok'Arl's presence had instilled in him gave way to forms in carefully chosen spots. The force-globes and spheres of anger as predictably as night followed day. 'It is imperative to the transparent alloy which were carefully balanced in the centre of the room Pentagon that we develop this technology before any other powers hung unsupported yet were more solid than any holosphere. Within the discover its existence.'

tennis-ball sized globes, tendrils of wispy pink plasma - neither quite gas

'Unfriendly powers, you mean?'

nor truly liquid - glowed purple under the blue light as they pulsed and

'There are no friendlies,' Nyby snorted. 'It wasn't so long ago that the billowed softly, dancing to their own tune.

Instrument panels of conductive polymer were painted on the sides of get stuck with people who went on and on.

the spheres, their patterns flowing like disturbed mercury as the plasma

'Just as well,' the Doctor said. 'I don't want to hang around here.'

stirred. Now and again a S'Raph in a coverall of medical-division lime

'Let me check my messages while we're here,' Marion suggested

would float by and cast an impassive black eye over the instruments, or indistinctly, her head lowered to peer at a notepad with a variety of adjust a setting with the slightest touch of a skeletal grey finger.

scribbles on it. 'I think we lucked out,' she said slowly.

Surgeon-Major Ksal remained on station at the open-petalled console

'In what way?'

that stretched out from what would have been the ceiling if the gravity was

'It seems I've to appear on a show tonight at the local TV station. I'm to

on. He monitored the read-outs with a sense of approval. The Tzun DNA give the Air Force's official position on these UFO sightings.'

he had introduced to sample cells of human stomach-lining tissue was,

'Really?' The Doctor brightened considerably. 'I've always wanted to

under his careful supervision, surrounding and bonding with the human get on television now and again.'

DNA strands. Satisfied with the progress of the reaction, he invoked a

stasis field around the globe and signalled to his subordinates.

Calming notes intended to let thoughts flow smoothly sounded gently from

Moving with extreme care, they bore a small canister over to the somewhere near the ceiling of the war room. The captain watched console, slotting it into a fitting in the centre. Ksal opened the valve with a impassively as the five black-collared branch heads took up seats around deft touch, deploying the contents of the canister into a holding tank fitted the central display of Earth. Although their black collars indicated equal with a transmat phase transmuter. Keying the molecular imaging system rank with himself, the captain had authority over them while in space, as to recognize only single-molecule chains, he brought up a vastly that was the function of his service branch. Only the Councillors could magnified view of the plasma in a small holosphere. Poking at the display overrule him, being in charge of whole expeditions - albeit usually of more with a slim point-and-shoot needle, he began triggering the transmat than one ship.

system to begin inserting molecular chains at certain specific points.

The captain was still listening to reports from the bridge as the others

A soft chime from the communications system drew Ksal's attention, entered. 'Continue monitoring remote sensor drones already in place.

though not enough to distract him from the task in hand. 'Chief Medical Launch a further group of remotes to positions five A-Us

above and below Officer,' he acknowledged.
the plane of the ecliptic.'
'All service branch heads are to report to the war room for final phase
'As you command,' a voice answered.
briefing,' the captain's voice announced.
'Is it not a foolish risk to fly without outriders?' a S'Raph in the dark
'Noted and logged.'
grey of Tactical Operations asked. 'Should we not be continually observed
by the gunboats?'
Marion led the Doctor into her cramped and paper-strewn office, having
'There is no one to fight here,' the captain replied. 'The humans do not
suggested that it might be a good idea to check in before anyone got have the technology to attack this vessel, and the nearest spacefaring suspicious over her absence. Finney arrived only moments later, power other than ourselves is that of Centauri - a world of total pacifists.
demanding to know where the base press officer had been since that We-'
morning. His face fell as he saw the Doctor relaxing with a copy of the
'We would rather conserve fuel by relying on remote probes,' Tzashan
local paper. 'That explains a lot. Deputized you, has he?'
added, taking position in his chair. 'The closest potential military opponent
'More or less,' Marion replied guardedly.
to us is the Rutan Host, massing near Achernar in Eridani. They,
'Well, I suppose it makes a change for you to have something useful to however, are fully occupied by their blood-feuds with the Sontarans. In do. Nothing personal,' he added hurriedly.
the unlikely event that any of their fleet do approach this system, the
Marion nodded in acknowledgement. She didn't take the slight remote probes will detect them early enough for us to prepare a defensive personally, of course. She was well aware, through long experience, that strategy and launch the gunboats, as well as sending to Zeta Reticuli for it was only her position that was being deprecated.
reinforcements form the twenty-fifth flotilla on border patrol.' He looked

'Found anything?' Finney asked the Doctor.

around. 'Ship's status, Captain?'

'Need to know,' the Doctor said sharply, if only half-seriously.

'All systems nominal, Councillor. We are maintaining the prescribed

'Keep an eye on him,' Finney murmured to Marion. 'If you need any orbit. We are alone in this sector, and sensors detect no spaceworthy help, let me know.' Apparently satisfied, he left.

vehicles on the planet below. A single chemical rocket capable of low

'That was refreshingly quick,' Marion sighed. She always seemed to orbit is in launch position in the main eastern continent, however, but it can carry no warhead dangerous to us even if we were not out of range.'

sound which echoed across the blasted countryside at Turyatam, four

'Tactical?'

massive booster engines rammed the SS-6 ICBM into the darkened

'We have been carrying out simulations of attack from various powers. skies.

We are prepared for every foreseeable eventuality.'

Its glowing exhaust trailing across the sky like a meteor in reverse, the

'Engineering?'

missile strained against the pull of Earth's gravity. Far from tilting into a

'All systems functioning at above expected efficiency,' the dark-blue target trajectory, however, this missile remained on its upward course. In uniformed S'Raph answered. 'Our main gravity drive remains unaffected minutes it was tearing itself free of the outermost fringes of atmosphere by the magnetic tides. We have had some difficulty adapting the smaller by brute force.

drives of the atmosphere-capable ships to the Earth's magnetosphere, but

Swinging around into a low orbit as the booster fuel expired, explosive

so long as the pilots remain linked to the telemetred guidance from bolts detonated silently around the nose-cone. The steel cap parted forward base they will be able to avoid unstable areas.'

slowly, giving mechanical birth to a football-sized metal globe. Four

'Military?'

trailing whip-antennae stretched out behind the globe as if parodying the

'Training is as expected,' the S'Raph in light grey answered. 'If the four boosters of its launch vehicle. A steady beeping began issuing from warriors are required, they are ready.'

the globe, as regular as a metronome.

'Excellent. Medical?'

Much to the relief of the sweating men and women in the bunker a

'I am carrying out the final phase of the DNA grafts now,' Ksal replied. hundred miles below at Turyatam the signal remained strong and steady.

'Our DNA successfully combines with the subject strands, and I am now Best of all, it remained alone.

deploying RNA strings into samples of our genome.'

The S'Raph in light grey looked towards him. 'Is there any sign of the Targeting glyphs stretched around the image of the globe like taloned DNA corruption that arose in the prototype musters?'

fingers. The starboard fire-control officer routed a small amount of power

'Negative. The problem was a simple matter stemming from the fact from the intermix generators to a forward graviton pulse focuser. 'Missile that we were working from cloned tissues. The duplication process targeted. Shall I fire?'

stimulated an over-production of the enzyme tryptophane hydroxylase in

'Negative,' the Tactical Major said finally. 'Sensors show it as a simple

the prototype Earth Ph'Sor. This enzyme produces an emotional instability beacon, no warheads or sensors. It's obviously just a test to see whether that has been bred out of our people. I have added a small genetic they can break atmosphere. Its destruction might give us away to that instruction into the new cell structure that inhibits production of this power-bloc.'

substance. Once assimilation of Earth is under way, we can treat the

prototype Earth Ph'Sor who have an excess of this enzyme.'

As they strolled along the street, Marion was nothing if not curious as to

'Re-engineering of the prototype muster may not be viable,' Tzashan how the Doctor had been with her for almost twenty-four hours solid and commented. 'How soon will the final design be ready?'

still didn't have even the faintest shadow of stubble. She often went to the

'By dawn at Corman.'

movies with either her brother or a date, and seemed to recall that

'Then the human genome is sufficiently compatible with ours?'

vampires were supposed to have that attribute.

'Yes, Councillor. After zero hour, we can begin full assimilation of Earth

Marion felt better the instant they stepped into the shaded lobby of the

society into the Tzun Confederacy, as well as assimilation of the TV station. Although the evening was drawing in and the breeze was Confederacy into Earth society to as great a degree as humanity is willing cooling, much of the tiring afternoon heat still remained. The Doctor went to accept.'

straight over to the receptionist, who wore a sweater and pearls as if she's

'They will accept anything we suggest,' Tzashan said dismissively. 'No stepped straight off a commercial. This was a TV station, Marion species will hand in their freely given technologies to return to the ways reminded herself, so maybe she had.

they wished to be free of. After zero hour, humanity will be wiling

'Can I help you?' the receptionist asked, bored.

participants in their latest stage of evolution.'

'Yes, as a matter of fact you can. I'm with CBS and would like to see

about using one of your reports on the recent flying saucer sightings. The

The crater-like depression of the egg-shaped silo meant that huge clouds stories have filtered out, of course, but we'd like eyewitnesses and local of smoke were directed upwards and outwards by the sloped sides as the interest to really sell the story nation-wide.' Marion knew this was all rocket at the centre shuddered and roared. Heralded by a thunderous nonsense yet, listening to him, she almost felt it was true.

The effect of the magic of a network was much more noticeable on the glanced at the audience as if weighing some decision.

receptionist. 'Really?' she asked, perking up. 'You'd have to talk to Mr

Marion could almost read his mind as he looked between her and his

Kline about that, but there's a talk show on the saucers going live in half escort, who were dark-haired. He probably wanted to at least arrest her, an hour - you can watch, if you like. I'll let Mr Kline know when he comes and looked as if he might order her out. 'Before you say anything,' she in, Mister...'

said in a low voice, 'just remember that your escort there is only human,

'Doctor.' He paused, as if recalling a previous reaction to what he

had *Captain*.' She hoped her voice sounded stronger than it felt.

to say. 'Doctor Jon Smythe.'

He looked startled at her implied knowledge. 'Tell me where I can find

the Doctor, and I might forget this.'

Stoker slammed open the door to Marion's office, breathing heavily as if

'I'm not dumb enough to believe that, and I don't think you're dumb

he had run all the way from Nevada. Cursing the fact that no one was enough to believe that I would.'

occupying the office, he started to pull the door closed. He stopped, Obviously acutely aware of the witnesses around, Stoker turned

registering the presence of the message pad on the desk.

sharply and left. Marion felt as if he'd marked her somehow in his mind.

Approaching the desk with a predatory movement, he snatched up the 'Well done,' the Doctor commented as he passed.

pad.

Agar sat in stunned silence as the hostile astronomer left with a smirk.

The studio was quite small, with cables snaking across the floor between How was he supposed to tell the world about his Venusian friends now?

the three-lensed cameras like spilled spaghetti. Mere feet away, a few

'They'll probably be disappointed, won't they?'

rows of moth-eaten seats were beginning to fill up with people who all

Agar looked in surprise at the short man who had taken the

either looked bored, or else had an almost religious fervour in their eyes.

astronomer's seat. 'What, the TV station?'

Marion sat nervously in a chair to one side. A thin-faced man with wide

'You met some aliens, I gather,' the man said, giving an odd smile. 'It

eyes was reclining in another, while a grim older man slouched in the third was in the papers.'

chair was looking daggers at the thin-faced one.

'That's as far as my story'll be going, mister.'

By an empty seat in the middle, a tanned figure in a sports jacket was

'Doctor. Oh, not that kind,' he added quickly as Agar felt blood drain

making notations to a script on a clipboard. A variety of people in short—

from his face. 'I don't think you're crazy.'

sleeved shirts bustled to and fro, trying to to trip over the cables, while the

'Everybody else does,' Agar shrugged.

Doctor watched from the edge of the plain-walled set. He was still telling

'Ah, but they haven't met the Tzun yet, and you have.'

anyone who asked that he was from CBS.

'Tzun? They're Venusians,' Agar corrected him bemusedly.

The grim older man had 'astronomer' written all over him, Marion

'What? Impossible. The Venusians have been extinct for millions of

thought, and was presumably there to provide expert debunking. years. the aliens you described were humanoid, weren't they?'

Obviously, then, the other man was the opposite end of the stick - a true

'Yes. Venus is relatively similar in size and mass to Earth...'

believer. This seemed to be the one the Doctor wanted to talk to, though

'No, the Venusians were a race of decapod hermaphrodites. Beside,

Marion couldn't figure out why. This man had been saying he had met the ship you saw was made of metal - terullian, in fact. The old Venusians Venusians, not Tzun.

could never have come here in that.'

'Quiet on the set,' someone called. The man in the sports jacket settled

'You mean they weren't advanced enough to develop that alloy?'

into his chair and smiled at the nearest camera.

'Terullian isn't an alloy, though it's alien to Earth. No, the reason the

'Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to-'

Venusians couldn't fly a ship like that is because metal was poisonous to

'Nothing!' a voice commanded triumphantly from the rear of the them. All metal except gold.' The Doctor furrowed his brow. 'I wonder audience.

what would have come of a meeting between them and the Cybermen...

The Doctor hastily ducked out of sight, and Marion wished she could No, the Tzun just told you they were Venusians because it's a local planet too, as Stoker strode down onto the set. Two air police

accompanied him. that's just about habitable. What else did they tell you?' he finished, his

'I am Captain Stoker of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, and eyes bright.

I am terminating this broadcast on grounds of national security. Any Agar wasn't used to this reaction, even from saucer enthusiasts, but he

repetition of the events here tonight will be considered a breach of was no longer in the mood after that strange discourse. 'Just what it says national security and punished as such.' He glared at Marion coldly, then in the paper - that they're our brothers and they want everybody to know it.'

'Yes, I thought they might. I wonder why? Did they show you a mothership of any kind?'

Chapter 13

Agar looked up suspiciously, since that information hadn't appeared in

the paper. 'Yes,' he said guardedly.

'Did it by any chance look like a dagger, or a short sword like a Roman Finney sat back once Stoker had left. Had that captain really cut him off gladius but with a long boom underneath and a pod at the end?'

with a 'Later?' He certainly had. Kreer and Stoker had irritated Finney a

Now Agar was interested. 'Yes,' he breathed. 'How could you possibly few times, but this virtual attempt to command their superior officer was know that?'

too much. Perhaps they had something to hide, he thought, about the disc

'Me?' The Doctor shrugged as he stood up. 'I met them twelve and the missile failure.

centuries ago at Mimosa II.' He gave Agar a cheery smile and moved

Not stopping to think about it in case he talked himself out of it, Finney

back to escort the Air Force woman to the exit.

impulsively stood up. They might use his reluctance to fly against him, but

Agar sat, stunned again. Surely the man was crazy, he told himself. he had nothing against driving a jeep. Hurrying to the motor pool, which Yeah, his subconscious answered nastily, he's crazy in exactly the same had a clear view of the flat country all around, Finney requisitioned a jeep way as you.

and followed Stoker's vehicle out of the base.

Stoker only went a short distance before stopping in a desert hollow to

Colonel Finney was busy in his Spanish-decorated office, comparing his the side of the road south of Cloudcroft. Not wishing to be seen, Finney notes on ideal test conditions with the next day's forecast, when Stoker pulled off the road and got out of the jeep. Creeping forward to observe entered. 'Ah, I've been looking for you,' Finney began. 'There's something from behind a rock, he watched as Stoker tapped the side of his neck and I need you to do.'

mouthed some words that Finney couldn't quite make out.

'Later,' Stoker answered, trying to look convincingly shocked and
His meaning became quite clear, however, when a large silver disc
saddened by what he had to say. 'Sir, I'm afraid that we must consider wavered into view a few yards overhead and began settling down into the Major Davison a security risk. I've only just prevented her from telling the dusty hollow. The ship landed and a hatch irised open, from which several press everything about the disc recovery. I recommend that she is blond men emerged to join Stoker in some sort of conference.

suspended from duty, pending further investigation.'

His natural desire to protect his command had fired Finney's curiosity.

'Major Davison is the press officer, she is supposed to give out stories Making sure that the blond men were all busy, the officer crept quietly up when needed.'

the ramp to the hatch opening.

'Perhaps her journalistic instincts have come into conflict with her duty,'

Inside, the furnishings were much the same as those in the crashed
Stoker suggested.

disc which had been flown out of Holloman the previous night. There was,

'Her duties are currently quite light in any case,' Finney told him. 'She's however, one important difference apart from the more normal size of the been a fine officer so far, and I don't want to go jumping to conclusions seats. The onyx panels here glowed with traceries of light, while the based on hearsay. I will have enquiries made, but that is all. Now it's my central crystalline column pulsed with an electric blue heartbeat.

turn. I need your assistance to look into some weapons requisition papers

Behind him, boots crashed on metal, forcing him to duck into the that don't quite check out.'

nearest partitioned alcove. Regretting his curiosity, he found himself in a

It was all Stoker could do to keep himself from laughing aloud.
small cupboard space filled with nozzle-topped cylinders which he
suspected to be fire extinguishers of some kind. Through the gap between the door and the wall, he saw the blond men spread out through

the ship as silently as cats, moving with impassive precision to each station. A nervous sweat began to ooze from Finney's pores as he realized that he might be about to fly for the first time in nearly seven
years - and quite possibly on the longest journey any man had ever

made. He concentrated on trying to keep his heart beating on a regular

basis, instead of rattling away at triple speed.

Although all the newcomers were inside, another set of purposeful

footfalls drew Finney's attention to the gap. His eyes widened as Stoker one of the control surfaces, but couldn't see it in the dark. The plane strode smoothly over to the central column and sat on a slightly raised should have been able to fly on one engine, but it was already seat.

dangerously overloaded with wounded men.

The AFOSI officer looked towards someone at a panel opposite, and

While his co-pilot helped pull on the yoke, Finney tried to guide the

gestured sharply with a faint upwards motion. 'Hiroch ta desh wey,' he plane towards the reservoir, hoping against hope that they could soft-rapped out clearly. 'Hesho Corman-maroth, hiy naphel. Tholphey hishu!'

land. As the snow flurries cleared in the last seconds, Finney froze in

'Sha-hoch, rish,' the other man answered.

horror, knowing with an empty calmness that he was dead. His fingers

While Finney's numbed brain tried to comprehend the strange words, remained glued ineffectually to the yoke.

the central column sparkled a fiercer azure blue and a strange high-The reservoir was completely frozen over.

pitched hum built up, forcing him to try to block his ears. The sound, not

There was a sickening downward lurch, a horrendous screaming

unlike that of a large generator, remained unaffected, as if it were a sound and finally a tidal wave of pain that washed away all thought and tinnitus attack forming inside his head. There was no sensation of motion, feeling.

but Finney was certain that the increase in light and sound could only

mean that some engine was in operation, and that they were now in flight.

The screaming faded gradually into the hum of the Tzun skiff, but Finney's

His breath coming in short gasps as if trying to match his racing heart, cold sweat was still in full flow. He realized belatedly that he was still Finney slid down the rear wall into a crouching position and

tried to shut alive, and that what had happened to him seven years ago was very out the world.

much in the past. He hoped he hadn't made any sounds that the men

outside could have heard. Never mind, he told himself, just being here

The darkness of the air was scattered with a wall of swirling white flakes proves that the fear can be conquered. He forced a grin for his own that made the windscreen look like a TV set under heavy interference. benefit, though there was no one to see it. From the flight deck outside, Hands wrapped around the control yoke with white-knuckle tightness, he heard a voice call Stoker's name.

Captain John C. Finney struggled as much with his own despair at the

'Ko?'

situation as with the pitching C-47 Skytrain, a military version of the DC3

'Corman-roch hiwey, rish. Chom Kreer sheph-roch.'

Dakota.

The major? Finney wondered. His mind shied away from the thought of

Visibility was practically zero, though faint glows below marked out his scientific advisor being one of these Tzun things, and concentrated where artillery fire was being concentrated on the far shore of the Chosin instead on the use of the word 'Corman'. He hardly dared hope that was reservoir. The groans from the cargo section were counterpointed by the where they were, the incredibly short journey time notwithstanding.

muted assurances of the field medics who were keeping an eye on the Finney had been stationed in many countries, and had developed an wounded men there.

affinity for picking up languages quickly. Alert to any recognizable Finney looked around, the soft drone of the engines failing to have the patterns of sounds, he listened carefully. He had heard the syllables 'roch'

usual effect on him in this weather. He opened his mouth to speak to the and 'wey' when they took off and again just now, in connection with co-pilot but before the words could come, the plane bucked as some Corman. Could one of those syllables mean 'up', 'over', or 'above', he vague flashed flitted by outside. The plane made a stomach-wrenching wondered. It seemed a reasonable guess that the other man had just told lurch to the left, and Finney hauled back on the yoke. The aircraft Stoker that they were now at or above Corman.

stabilized slightly, but was straining to do so. An engine-fire

warning light

'Hosh-chom Kreer,' Stoker commanded, looking towards someone or

was flashing on the instrument panel, and Finney risked a quick glance something out of Finney's narrow field of vision. 'Snowbird here. We are out of his window.

above you, Major.' Finney's mind reeled again. This craft was Snowbird! A

The port engine was stuttering, sparks and flames trailing from it. All ship supplied by the same aliens who were knocking down his missiles.

too aware of what would happen, Finney feathered the engine, shutting it He had felt for a long time that something dirty was going on behind his down. The plane instantly lurched again, the altimeter spinning madly back, and this proved it. 'Are the warheads prepared?' Stoker went on.

anticlockwise.

Finney's pulse pounded as he realized he had been taken for a fool. And

Wondering whether this was how a downed pheasant felt, Finney to think he had just put the investigation into the theft into the hands of the struggled vainly with the yoke, but the ground continued to get ever closer very men who had carried it out! One thing was certain: he definitely at a steep angle. He suspected that there must be a hole somewhere in wouldn't be agreeing to suspend Marion after this, Finney promised himself.

'They couldn't have been attracted by any space launches,' the Doctor

'They are both armed,' Kreer's rich voice confirmed. 'Land now, while went on, ignoring her in order to pursue his own train of thought. 'Or could the remaining humans at Corman are otherwise occupied. You can fly they...?'

myself and the bombs to Washington.'

'Of course not,' Marion scoffed. 'There haven't been any yet.'

'Understood.' Stoker made a chopping motion and turned back to the

'The Soviets launch Sputnik One tonight,' the Doctor mused.

man whom Finney assumed to be the pilot. 'Tholphey hish ula,' he

'And you're not trying to stop it?' Marion was genuinely unsurprised by

commanded. 'Siroch ta desh.'

his foreknowledge this time. This was, after all, what the CIA was The hum faded and Finney heard the door open. Kreer strode in and supposed to be for.

several men rushed out, returning immediately with two large crates The Doctor threw her a scowl. 'Hmm. Soviet Russia was even more
mounted on low trolleys. Once they were aboard, the door closed and the secretive than anywhere else in this time zone,' he thought aloud. 'Many hum began again. 'Take us up on cloaking-level power.'
disasters went unacknowledged for decades. Last year's Khyshtym
'As you command, sir.'
incident was the worst nuclear disaster of this century - Chernobyl
'Make course for Washington,' Kreer ordered.
included - but it was virtually never heard of.'
'As you-' A sound from Finney's hiding place silenced their
'So,' Marion prompted, never having heard of either of those incidents.
conversation. Finney looked down and saw that the hem of his uniform
'So there are two major Soviet holidays: Revolution Day, October
jacket had dislodged a small box of some kind. One of the crewmen seventeenth; and May Day. What better way to celebrate history than by whipped open the door, revealing Finney to a startled Stoker and Kreer.
making history? What if Sputnik One really went up on May Day, but
Kreer laughed unexpectedly, but it was an unpleasant sound; the failed for some reason-'
laughter of a ghoulish observer at a Grand Prix crash. 'Well, I did suggest
'Or was knocked down like our Atlas,' Marion added slowly.
that you suspect everyone, didn't I?' He pursed his lips. 'Now what are we
'So they then wiped the entire embarrassing failure from their history
going to do with you?'
books... It's an interesting thought.'
'He is a security risk,' Stoker said flatly. He drew his pistol and levelled
'But the next logical date would be October seventeenth,' Marion
it.
protested. 'That's not for another ten days - either you're wrong or why
'Put away your toy, Stoker,' Kreer snapped harshly. 'The launch now?'
disappearance of a base commander would be a signal too strong for the

'The suspected saboteurs would think that way as well, and thus

humans to ignore.' Kreer drew a small crystalline disc from his pocket and prompt the authorities to launch earlier, to forestall a repeat occurrence.

motioned to two crewmen to hold Finney still. Finney struggled against Except that if my theory's right there wouldn't need to be a repeat. Some their grip, but his fear of flying had robbed his muscles of some of their signal or the like transmitted from the first launch was sufficient to attract power, and in any case the crewmen seemed to have superhuman the Tzun. Yes! I'm sure that's what happened; it's always been a bit of a strength.

mystery why they launched ten days before the big celebrations, and this

Kreer smiled and puffed himself up, as if he was drinking in Finney's would provide a reason.' The Doctor paced furiously around the cluttered discomfort. 'This can be done painlessly, if you have the right equipment room.

and time to spare,' Kreer began, pressing the disc to the side of Finney's

'But who would be able to interfere?' Marion asked, hoping he would

head, just behind the ear. 'But it's so much more... invigorating this way.'

name a terrestrial nation.

'Who indeed? The only thing that's certain is that if they knew about

The Doctor and Marion flipped through mountainous piles of photographs the Tzun then whoever it was must also be an alien.'

and documentation in Davison's office.

'Other Tzun?' Marion suggested.

'There have been reports of various kinds since the Forties,' Marion

'No. that's the other piece of the puzzle. They would have

began, thinking aloud. 'But ones matching this pattern only since the early communications equipment and technology capable of contacting their summer of this year.'

people directly. Castaways, perhaps.'

'Same here,' the Doctor agreed. 'But why did they turn up in May 1957

'Someone or something stranded without a ship?'

particularly?'

'Could be. But they'd still have some salvaged technology surely? No,

'Why not? It's as good a time as any,' Marion shrugged, refusing to be we're after a visitor who's stranded here with no technology of

their own, drawn.

but who has the skills to construct advanced technology from Fifties parts.'

'Such as?' Marion urged, intrigued by the idea despite herself.

'I can't think of anyone offhand. Not that wouldn't stand out in a crowd **Chapter 14**

anyway. We'll go and see Finney. There's a favour I want to ask of him.'

Nodding, Marion opened the door. Together, they strolled down the

pale beige corridor, before Marion pointed out a window. Outside, a jeep Marion looked on, stunned, as the Doctor examined the back of Finney's came to a halt in a reserved space. Finney was sitting in it and, as they neck. The colonel was staring blankly at a weather report. It was obvious watched, debarked stiffly. 'I wonder where he's been,' Marion began.

that whatever had happened to Nyby had also now happened to Finney -

'You took the words right out of my mouth. He's walking like a zombie.'

or possibly worse.

'You sure?'

'Marion,' the Doctor said loudly, startling the major. 'Do you remember

'Very sure,' the Doctor said firmly.

what I told you about humans building barriers in their minds?'

'He's heading for his office; if we hurry, we can catch up and see if

'Whatever that meant, yeah.'

there's something wrong.' She wasn't really sure if she actually wanted to

'Are you ready to cross some?'

know. It wasn't an idea she relished.

'Such as?'

'You once said you didn't like giving orders. Well, you're going to have

to get used to doing just that. Keep Finney confined to the medical wing.

As the next senior officer you'll have to take charge of day-to-day operations here.'

'Much as I hate to admit it, a lot of men here won't like that.'

'Then that's their tough luck. Be firm and they'll follow you. If it comes

to the worst, find another man they respect to relay your orders,' the Doctor finished in a disdainful tone. 'Humans...' he muttered

disconsolately. 'I'm going on to that power station at Elephant Butte reservoir. If you haven't heard from me by noon tomorrow, get every man

you can muster and head for Corman. Arrest everyone there, and take

any other measures you see fit.'

For a moment, Marion was about to refuse. She wasn't sure if a mere

journalist was authoritarian enough to do what was needed. But, there

was only one way to be sure, and it was closer to the sort of career she'd

hoped for. 'I'll do my best,' she said sadly.

'I know you will.'

Nyby glared at Shok'Arl, his dark features twisted with the fury that only

the betrayed can feel. 'The Soviets have put a rocket into space,' he thundered. 'Your part of the agreement with the Pentagon included

preventing such action!'

'The terms of our agreement,' Shok'Arl corrected calmly, 'are that no

missile strike will be allowed to impact on this country. A simple binary

transmitter in a decaying orbit is not such a missile, and does not fall

within the terms of reference.'

'How could you know it wasn't a missile launch? They did use an ICBM, according to our intelligence sources.'

'An SS-6, I believe,' Shok'Arl acknowledged. 'Its trajectory was not suited to a missile strike, and our ship's sensors detected no warhead.

Nyby, we have not betrayed you.' The Tzun turned away.

counting down the seconds.

Not yet, you mean, Nyby thought. This was obviously just a first step;

Kreer smiled hungrily.

what if the Russians launched an attack and it wasn't recognized as such

until too late? Or what if Shok'Arl was just stringing him along? Nyby stormed away before he did something he might regret.

A long black limousine pulled up on a weed-strewn expanse of concrete

jetty, having driven in from Axon Run Park, southeast of DC. Leaving his

blank-faced chauffeur to park the car where it would be secure, Major
Kreer walked the length of the concrete jetty. His destination was the
gently sloped gangplank of a lean Fletcher class destroyer moored under
the slate-grey skies at the Naval Research Laboratories at the junction of
the Potomac, the Anacostia, and the Washington Channel.
Although the *Jessup* had been commissioned during the second world
war, it - like many others of its class - had been retrofitted for electronic
warfare in the early Fifties. A thick-legged tripod radar mast had been
added to the rear of the superstructure, and several weapons had been
updated. The sailors busying themselves about their tasks on deck paid
no heed to the fact that an officer in Air Force uniform was boarding the
ship.
Kreer considered it apt that a vessel of the past should be his base of
operations. After all, the past was what drove him. He passed quickly
through a hatch in the forward shelter deck, just forward of the legs of the
radar mast, and moved with familiar ease through the corridors and companionways below decks. It took only moments for him to wend his
way to what would normally have been the captain's cabin, just below the
forward edge of the shelter deck.
Opening the door, he slipped into the room and shrugged off his coat.
'Shadow?' he called softly. A low purr answered him from the top of a
narrow cupboard overlooking the door. 'Ah, excellent,' he murmured,
locating Shadow's greenish-golden eyes. 'Be assured, it will soon be time
to feed,' he told the cat solemnly. Nodding to himself, he turned his attention to the rest of the room. There was no bunk inside, since

Kreer had long since taken a suite at Washington Circle. Instead, the cabin was packed with softly humming machinery. Something of an odd mixture of technologies, it had parts of USAF and Navy communications and radar circuitry cobbled together with crystalline I-O chips, optical nanoprocessors and a holosphere, all clearly of Tzun manufacture. The whole thing was lashed together with skeins of copper wiring and fibreoptics.

Seating himself in the single chair, Kreer twisted a dial that had been cannibalized from a radar range-finding apparatus and gazed at a matt ebon plate. In a few seconds, the plate began to glow faintly with characters reading 'Transference in progress. ETA 4:16:59', the digits her composure, she spread a chart across the instrument panel. 'All right, look at this.' She pointed to a waterway several miles beyond the city, its

edges as crinkled as those of any fjord. 'We should still have enough fuel

to carry on past Washington, eject over Annapolis on the shore and let

the plane crash harmlessly into Chesapeake Bay.'

The radio was active again when Ace returned to the flight deck after

'Annapolis is a massive naval base and academy which wouldn't be

spending the past couple of hours disassembling the contents of one happy about us dropping in. Second, these aren't ejector seats.'

crate of plasma rifles and rewiring them in ways they hadn't been

'How many parachutes are there?'

designed for. Outside, a faint glow of pre-dawn light filtered through the

'None.'

clouds over the distant horizon ahead. 'What are they saying?'

'Did you count?'

'They want to know who we are, since we haven't got a filed flight plan,'

'Twice.'

Benny told her. It was an understandable, if irritating piece of red tape,

Benny's blood ran cold as the tiny pin-points of light ahead suddenly

Benny thought.

took on the mental appearance of the gleaming tips of lethal spikes. 'Yes,

'Put me on,' Ace recommended, pulling on a headset. Benny flipped a I suppose I expected that.' She slumped back into her seat. 'It just seems switch at the radio.

so excessive, you know. I wouldn't mind being more certain that this is the

'AF 1268-31,' a stern voice crackled, 'this is National approach. You best alternative available.'

are on an unfiled flight heading. Please state your business.'

'Neither would I,' Ace grinned crookedly, then looked across at Benny

'National approach,' Ace began in what Benny thought was a with a more introspective expression. 'I'd be happy enough to know that

surprisingly calm voice. 'This is AF 1268-31, we are on a training flight, we're doing the right sort of thing generally.'

but have lost one engine. We require an immediate emergency landing,

'That's not an uncommon wish,' Benny agreed. It wouldn't have been

over.'

the first time that she'd wondered whether they shouldn't really have left

'AF 1268-31, your accent sounds-'

the fallen where they lay on ancient battlefields.

'National approach, we are training as part of a NATO exchange

'For three years Dalek-hunting in Spacefleet,' Ace began more

program - and we still require that emergency landing, over.' Benny was subduedly, 'after we'd fought hard, we played harder. Nowadays I think curious to note that Ace's tone seemed genuinely urgent and impatient. maybe we weren't so much playing as looking for something in our lives Something was niggling at the back of her mind.'

that would tell us we were doing the right thing. All we needed was

'Roger that,' the voice proclaimed after a long pause. 'Do you require something cheery to remind us of the life around the galaxy we were emergency services on stand-by?'

trying to protect.'

'Better safe than sorry, National.'

'Every soldier in history felt that,' Benny said with assurance, trying to

'Tenders will be waiting. We're lighting up runway four for your eastern come to terms with the idea that it might be the last piece of wisdom she approach.'

would dispense. ' "If the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy

'Roger and out.'

reckoning to make..." '

Benny's curiosity about this ancient mode of transport had kept her

amused during the flight, but practicality was a strong instinct in her. 'Are The distant rumble of water rushing through giant turbines slightly muffled you sure you can land this thing?' she asked. Ace had been behaving the distorted groaning of strained reality that echoed through the professionally enough to leave Benny with no doubts as to her experience cathedral-sized generator hall. The TARDIS solidified into being on an with assault hoppers, but she had notices a few tension lines whenever empty walkway half-way up one wall.

Ace had to do any major manoeuvring with this low-tech but complex

The Doctor emerged a few seconds later, patting the door gently as he

vehicle.

closed it. The steel walkways stretched on for tens of yards on either side

'If you mean can I get it on the ground, the answer is a definite yes. If before dropping off at flights of steep steps. Large and rounded grey you mean can I get it on the ground in a safe enough manner for us to generators buzzed and hummed on the floor forty feet below, like snoring walk away from... That's be difficult enough even if we still had a complete elephants. Overalled men toured the scattered machinery, checking on undercarriage.'

the generators and the thick pipes that festooned the whole complex.

Benny had expected that, but it still chilled her to the bone. Recovering

'Perfect,' he said happily.

'Hold it right there,' a voice drawled, accompanied by the soft clicks of

'Right,' Ace pressed a stud on her wrist computer. In the cargo hold,

revolvers being cocked.

the rewired plasma rifles exploded. In a chain reaction, the power cells in

'Not so perfect,' the Doctor said to the two tan-uniformed guards.

the other rifles also detonated, the fireflash spreading to what little fuel

remained in the wing tanks.

'Hold tight,' Ace recommended as she pushed the control yokes gently

The Hercules didn't quite explode. Flame rippled along its length, towards the double-row of lights in the early morning darkness.

crackling over every surface with ravenous energy. 'Now we make like

Benny checked her harness and looked out with a feeling of dread as shepherds and get the flock out of here,' Ace added.

the lights rushed up at them all too quickly. 'Aren't you going to lower the

'Where to?'

two landing legs we have got?'

'Good question.' Ace looked around quickly. On the other side of

the

'Best not. That would just help tip the plane over.'

silver trail of the Potomac, lights were rising from Bolling AFB and Benny gave a maudlin nod. 'I'm content to dig these things up, but I approaching the airport. To the left, street-lights like a string of glowing don't know how you work them.' She almost wished Ace were calling out beads traced the line of the Williams Memorial Bridge. 'That bridge,' Ace their speed and altitude, so that at least she would have some idea of decided. 'That looks like another airbase over there, so we don't want to when to close her eyes. Instead, however, the younger woman simple go there.'

operated the controls with a stony expression, entirely taken up by the

'Isn't that where the bombs are most likely to be?'

task at hand.

'There's an old saying: "Don't shit where you eat." ' She pointed at a

Landing lights flashing like guttering candles in the wind, the Hercules glowing haze to the north-east, where the city lights were reflecting from dropped from the heavy sky like a dead albatross.

the clouds. 'That's where we look - right in the middle of town.'

It hammered loudly into the tarmac with a noticeable bounce, the Not sparing a glance for the infernal light behind them, the two women

impact slamming both women against their harnesses. Frantically, Ace moved swiftly on.

dropped the flaps and shut down the engines as quickly as she could.

The unaffected plane continued squealing along the tarmac with the cry of Manco's wife answered the telephone first, passing it resignedly to her a tortured boar, smoke and sparks billowing from the lower fuselage.

husband. He was still not truly awake as he grunted an incoherent As if the nose were an axis, the huge tail began swinging wide to greeting into the phone. 'Joe,' the voice said, 'get down to National. All starboard of the scorched runway. Benny and Ace were showered with hell has broken loose this morning, and they want Bureau presence.'

broken glass and bounced around as the now unstable plane's starboard

Manco groaned involuntarily. Not only was it so early, but he was wing dipped to bite into the ground, the tip shearing off with a screech of already busy enough with this Kreer business. He knew, at some base torn metal.

genetic level shared by every worker, that that was the problem

with The aircraft shuddered to a halt, a cloud of smoke and fumes rising being a younger employee. You got all the odd jobs foisted on you and around it.

couldn't say no, because if you did your boss would find it easier and

A very bruised Ace and Benny fumblingly released themselves from cheaper to replace you than anyone else. 'Okay, I'll be there in half an their harnesses and staggered back towards the entry hatch. 'Any landing hour.' He replaced the handset on its cradle. 'Sorry, Sue,' he said you can walk away from...' Ace muttered. The inward-bulging dents in the apologetically.

hatch were proof enough that it had crumpled under the impact, and it

'That's okay. You never know, this might help with your promotion was clearly jammed solid.

prospects.'

'Sod it,' Ace grumbled, drawing her blaster. Aiming at the top edge, she

I should be so lucky, he thought, but then brightened. Sue and early

blew the hatch clean away from the fuselage. Kicking a few smoking promotion were what he lived for. 'You always do managed to press the fragments aside, she clambered out. Benny followed with a dazed look. right wake-up button, don't you?'

Their ears were still ringing from the crash, but the flashing lights that

'It's a gift.'

Benny pointed out were sufficient to announce the impending arrival of

'Keep it wrapped nicely - I'll try to be back early as well.' He finished

the emergency services.

dressing and left the bedroom, pausing on his way to the car only long

The two women took deep and searing breaths of fresh air, then bolted enough to grab a carton of orange juice from the fridge.

across the grass expanse at the side of the runway. 'At least we don't

have to worry about forensics,' Benny puffed.

There were few people around as the clock struck eight in the Senate

cafeteria, which was open to the public. It was on the second floor of the The blackened cylindrical husk of the Hercules' fuselage lay

canted on the Capitol, directly under the Senate chamber. Ace and Benny had both runway like the rotted cadaver of a beached whale. The remnants of its ordered strong coffee and eggs Benedict - Ace couldn't for the life of her wings lay scattered along the runway to either side, only smouldering fathom why they didn't just call it scrambled eggs - on toast from the ragged stumps remaining attached to the upper fuselage.

breakfast menu.

Like the insects that crawled over any decaying corpse, there were

Relaxing with the coffee, Ace's eyes roved around the plush dining scavengers picking their way through the shattered pieces of the burnt-room, noticing the shifty looks she and Benny were getting from the staff. out aircraft. Uniformed police officers mingled with personnel from Bolling Comparing their own dusty and worm clothes to the smart business AFB across the river. Sombrely suited representatives of the FAA, CIA, accoutrements worn by the few other customers, she could understand and NSA prowled around like executive vultures while the FBI's why.

representative stepped carefully through the cinders in the company of

'It's not likely to be in a cafe, Ace,' Benny said in a low voice. Despite the airport's flight director.

the time they'd spent together, Ace still caught herself wondering now and

'You say they claimed to be a NATO flight?' Mano asked, all

again if Benny really could read her mind. 'Even one like this. This isn't a professional once he had grasped the magnitude of the event.

little handbag-sized terrorist bomb we're dealing with.'

'That's what the tower operators reported,' the lined, greying official

Ace shrugged. 'I was just thinking that they might put one in the Capitol nodded. 'A woman's voice claimed to be on a NATO exchange program.

building generally.'

We didn't think any other NATO members had female pilots either, but we

'Why not both?'

thought we could question them after they landed.'

'One's enough to flatten the city. Besides, you remember that map in

Curiouser and curiouser, Manco thought. 'Was anyone inside when it

Nyby's office - Washington and Moscow marked in red. Two cities, two was destroyed?'

bombs. I don't think they sent them here just for practice. And I certainly

'God only knows. Even if they were, the temperatures in there must

don't believe in that level of coincidence.'

have been so hight there'd be nothing left of them but smoke.'

'You mean they want to detonate one here and one in Moscow? That

'Has the origin of the plane been determined?'

would start a war...'

'The folks from Bolling across the way say that a Hercules was stolen

'The thought had occurred,' Ace agreed dryly. 'It's been tried before. from Corman AFB in Nevada yesterday...' Manco didn't really hear the Now, if I were them, I'd want to set that bomb smack in the middle of the rest of the official's words, his brain having blocked out everything else in governmental area, just to be on the safe side. From here down to the order to concentrate on the idea that this plane might have come from the river is pretty central.'

very base where Kreer spent so much of his time. He wished he could

'Is there anything on the detector?'

believe in coincidence that much. At least, he told himself, this trip wasn't

'Not a beep.'

messing up that investigation after all.

'I'm sorry, what was that?' Manco asked apologetically after a moment.

The angelic figure whom Agar would have recognized as Xeno watched

'We're still trying to find a serial number legible enough to tell if it's the

with professional detachment as the captain of *R'Shal* checked the same aircraft.'

program encoded in the crystalline I-O chip he had prepared. On the

'I see,' Manco acknowledged, for the sake of politeness. He didn't need

display of a small handheld device, a red line curved around the Earth's to see any serial number; he was as certain that this was the same plane surface and terminated at a blue spot in New Mexico.

as he was that the wind existed, even though he never saw that either. It

'Maintain continuous telemetry transmission,' the captain ordered. 'This seemed that everything odd that happened always came back

round to is the final test before zero hour.'

the enigmatic Major Kreer. 'So the plane crashed and exploded?'

'As you command. What of the return course?'

'Well, it was certainly a bad landing, but not enough to cause this level

'That is at your discretion.'

of heat. We think it must have been deliberately destroyed to obscure

Xeno nodded and took the transparent chip, moving to his ship across some form of evidence - we've found several small pools of melted metal, the clouded floor of the hangar deck. The captain turned and left the with no way of telling what they are beyond the fact that they were cargo hangar, saddened but impassive at the knowledge that the pilot would not of some kind.'

be returning.

Manco nodded. He didn't feel needed here any more; certain that when

* * *

he found out what Kreer was up to, he would find the answer to this

mystery as well. 'Keep me posted.'

sent bright bolts into both of them. One man went down with a smoking

chest, but the other returned fire. The disruptor blast blew a dusty channel

Ace and Benny had spent the better part of the morning stumbling wearily in the stone beside Ace before she hit him with another shot. He too around such central Washington buildings as the public were allowed to pitched to the ground, the disruptor clattering across to the foot of the enter. They had found nothing.

stairs. Ace went down to the floor.

The White House tour wasn't due to start until after lunchtime, so they

'There's no one else here,' she called, spinning the blaster around her

had wandered down to the Mall past the various museums to the finger and back into its holster. She pointed the radiation probe at the box Washington Monument. A narrow structure like a taller Cleopatra's and its ticking speeded up so much it sounded like a football rattle.

Needle, it towered over the whole area.

'Ace,' Benny called, 'look.' She pointed at a small red light at shin level

A small and rickety lift took tourists up to a viewing platform

under the near the door. 'It's a good bet the Confederacy knows we're here.'

copper point at the tip of the monument, but it had been plain and empty

Ace thought for a moment, recalling the Doctor's warning about

apart from a few country hicks who were visiting town. As the lift noisily handing the warhead over to the authorities. However, if the Tzun knew of descended once more, Ace leaned against the wall while Benny paced their presence, who knew what they might do? She lifted the disruptor around inside the steel box. She peered frowningly at the floor plates. from the foot of the stairs and tossed it up to Benny. 'Fuse the lift controls

'How high would you say this tower is?' she asked.

so that nobody can come down and get hurt if any other guards show up,

'Five hundred and fifty feet maybe,' Ace replied. 'What difference does then keep an eye out for any reinforcements.'

it make?' She chased thoughts through her mind again, certain that they

'Shouldn't we evacuate them in case that goes off?'

should still be looking for an important structure near the centre. The

'They'd never get far enough away in time to survive.'

White House would probably be inaccessible even to the Tzun, the Capitol was clean and Bolling was too obvious - and also probably too Deep gonging alarms sounded throughout the war room aboard *R'Shal*, secure for their brand of infiltration since it was in the capital.

several displays set into the circular table showing images of Ace and

'Five-fifty? That's about what I thought. I was just thinking about the Benny entering the lift maintenance room at the monument.

depth of foundations needed to support a structure of this height. On Sr'Shol triggered a communications link to the surface. 'Full alert!

Metaluna we excavated a series of five-hundred-foot towers with twenty—

Intruders at ground zero. Locate and destroy!'

foot-deep foundations. Of course, those towers were a little wider, and the

gravity was a little lower...'

All around the monument were carefully tended lawns. In front of Benny

'But there should still be enough room under this place for the odd were two reflecting pools between her and the Lincoln Memorial, while a maintenance room or three?'

large tidal basin was a couple of blocks to her left. Some distance to her

'Exactly. It's worth a look, at least.'

right, the White House backed the grassy ellipse. Benny was unsurprised

'Come on then,' Ace agreed as the doors opened. Stepping around the to see a long black limousine, full of blond men, hurtle round the curved next group of tourists, they left the small hallway. Outside, a queue of road at the edge of the tidal basin and pull up between her and the visitors waited their turn. In moments, the lift started noisily up again. smaller reflecting pool. Benny ducked back into the small hallway as they Hearing it, Ace and Benny slipped back into the small chamber. A narrow opened fire with Thompson sub-machine-guns, the harsh sound sending metal door was set into the wall to one side of the lift. It was locked, but the tourist queue scattering towards the Federal Triangle as bullets blew Benny quickly opened it with some small tools.

chips from the monument.

Beyond, a narrow stairway led down one wall into the darkness. Ace

Fumbling with the unfamiliar weapon's setting controls, Benny fired

felt around for a light switch and pressed it when she found it. A yellow back at the car.

bulb flickered on, illuminating a series of equipment lockers and some

winching gear below.

It was ironic, Ace felt, that a chained and corrugated metal box roughly

More interesting were the two ribbed structures in which two Nordic the size of a large coffin could well end up effectively burying an entire men in grey jumpsuits stood, and the large corrugated metal box on a city if her demolitions skills couldn't be successfully applied in the other trolley in the middle of the floor. As soon as the light came on, the two direction. A harsh rattle from above was followed by a distinctive disruptor men opened their eyes and lifted disruptors.

whine and the sound of a large explosion. She couldn't claim to be As Benny leapt back through the door, Ace leaned half beyond it and surprised at this turn of events.

Professionalism dampening all other feelings, she ignored the sounds wire. She risked a few heartbeats to check under the clock for either of battle that echoed down from above. She slipped a maintenance booby traps or further wires that might indicate she had

been wasting her crowbar into the narrow crack between the box's side and its lid, bearing time on a dummy set-up. There were none, however, and at 010 she cut down on it as hard as she could. The padlocked chain creaked and the first wire.

stretched a tiny amount as the very edge of the lid buckled slightly.

Nothing happened.

Pausing for breath, Ace then lunged downwards, slamming her total

With her pulse pounding in her ear as a bass counterpoint to the bodyweight down through her shoulders and arms.

clock's ticking through 007, she cut the second wire.

The chain snapped, the lid bucking up to fall back with a startlingly loud

The ticking stopped and for a moment she thought her heart had as

rattle.

well. As the seconds went on and nothing else happened, Ace let out the

Throwing the lid back, Ace looked over the mechanism with a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. She steadied herself knowledgeable eye. The warhead itself was a drab metal cylinder about against the casing before her legs could give way. 'That was just too three feet long and eighteen inches across, dotted with warning stencils smegging close.'

and fusing instructions. Ace noted with wry amusement that there were no

Shaking her head to clear the cobwebs, she wound the ends of the

guidelines for defusing it. A smaller cylinder, festooned with wires and wires together so that she could remove her cables without breaking the linked to a rectangular attachment with the short antenna of a portable circuit. She turned to the radio receiver next, scrutinizing it closely. Why radio receiver, was fitted to one end of the warhead. At the other end, a was it set to go off when power was denied, she wondered. She bulky mechanism with several slowly rotating gears was wired up to the wondered if the other warhead was rigged the same way. She smiled warhead. Other cables led from this to a clock display in a slim tray at just slowly as the thought led her to the logical conclusion. If both bombs were about lid level.

meant to detonate simultaneously, then the other must be fitted with a

A pit opened beneath Ace's stomach as her eyes fell on the clock transmitter. When it detonated, the signal would cease and this one would display. With a faint whirring and ticking it had already

counted down from go off.

060 to 054, one digit slipping by with each passing second. Too late now,

With practised and professional speed, she attached her cables to the

she noticed the single electrical contact on the interior side of the rim of middle of the wires connecting the receiver to the detonator. Cutting the the metal wall. She had no need to examine the lid to know that there wires between the ends of her cables, she carefully pulled the receiver would be a matching contact there.

aside by the amount allowed by her cables. She slipped her hand down

Leaning into the casing, Ace sought the terminals at either end of the between it and the warhead, feeling around for the end of the detonator.

wires that connected the clock to the gear mechanism. The wires were all

Unscrewing the detonator by turning it a minute amount at a time, she

plain and uncoloured, disappearing into little molehills of solder. The finally tugged the unwieldly eight-inch cylinder free. Dropping it into her ticking of her own heart kept time so well she barely needed to glance at pocket, she retrieved her cables. A couple of faint clicks came from within the clock to know it was down to 046.

the warhead mechanism as the signal was cut off, but nothing else Mapping out the circuit pattern in her mind, she reasoned that the clock happened. Hefting the receiver, Ace grinned triumphantly. If she could was connected to the warhead by a power feed shared mutually with the plug it into her wrist computer, it should home in on the other bomb.

radio receiver. That being the case, it seemed set not to complete an

A renewed burst of multiple disruptor whines attracted her attention

electrical circuit at 000, but to break one.

now that the chamber had become almost preternaturally silent with the

The question why was academic as she unscrewed the cover of the cessation of the ticking. Ace loped grimly out of the room clock display, which was already reading 031. She examined the clock

mechanism, confirming that it was linked to a circuit-breaker.

The disruptor was growing uncomfortably hot in Benny's palm, but the

Another explosion from above showered her with fine dust,

turning the Aryan-looking Ph'Sor were still safely behind the cover of the low wall sheen of sweat on her brow to a thin mud that caked her eyelids. surrounding the pool now that their limo was no more than a smouldering Resisting the urge to pause to wipe it away, she dug out the wires and ruin. They had switched to disruptors, either feeling safer now that the clips she had used to alter the Hercules's transponder. The counter tourists had run away or else assuming that any damage had already passed 022 as she peeled the plastic insulation away from a spot on one been done thanks to Benny's use of one. Shards of marble were wire to attach a clip.

shattering into hot dust under the blasts as Ace emerged, immediately

At 016 she had completed repeating the manoeuvre on the second flinging herself to the ground beside Benny to avoid a blast that zipped past her ear.

was confirmed as Ace calmly stepped round the corner and gunned them

'What kept you?' Benny asked, not entirely lightly. 'Did you manage it?'

down with well-placed blaster shots before either of them could take aim

'You're still here, aren't you? Three more ticks and this,' she jerked a at her. Benny watched with equal measures of relief and disgust as the thumb upwards to include the whole needle-like structure, 'would have two Ph'Sor twitched briefly on the grass, the wisps of smoke rising from been America's first rocket in space.' Sirens had struck up a cats' chorus their wounds matching those curling from the muzzle of Ace's blaster.

in the distance. 'I think the cavalry's on the way.'

Ace herself looked on apparently impassively, not sharing whatever

The first police car to appear was hit square-on with a high- powered she felt. She re-holstered the blaster with slow movements, as if he were disruptor blast from one of the Ph'Sor. Smoke and flame scratching at the holding something very heavy, or chained down with souls. 'Why didn't bonnet, it screeched across the curve in the road and splashed into the they run like the others?' she asked quietly. She turned away before tidal basin. 'Have they all got disruptors?' Ace queried.

Benny could even think about an answer.

'Yes, and a couple of them have local weapons as well.'

The sound of a car engine drew Benny's attention then, as a police car

'Good enough. Keep 'em busy.' Ace turned to a speaker mounted on

hurtled across the grass, knocking aside the officers to whom it was the wall and, to Benny's puzzled surprise, pulled it away from the stone. assigned. Ace drew her blaster, but no one fired at her or Benny. Instead, She opened up the back of it, making sure that its power cables were a Ph'Sor blasted the bodies of his fallen comrades at maximum power.

pulled free. Already the crack of police revolvers was joining in the The corpses flared briefly and vanished as the car bumped back onto the general cacophony.

road and sped eastwards.

'What the smeg are you doing?' Benny asked. 'Trying to take over the

Spying an unattended police motorcycle, Benny bounded towards it.

Doctor's position as chief gadget-basher?'

'My turn,' she called to Ace, mounting the bike. She looked back to see

'You don't have to be a Time Lord to know about the foibles of Ace interpose herself between her and more newly arriving police. She individual weapons,' Ace answered, ducking as stone chips were blasted hesitated for an instant, but then decided that Ace could look after herself.

apart above her head. 'When we were fighting in the Ceti sector, The police motorcyclist was already running towards her, and she kicked disruptors were issued because the microwave beam could cook Dalek the engine into wakefulness.

blobs inside their armour.' She had now freed the back of the speaker,

The last thing she heard before roaring off after the Ph'Sor was Ace's

and was tinkering inside. 'It was a big mistake. The Daleks are many voice. 'It's a fair cop, guv,' it said sarcastically.

things - all bad - but they do know about strengths and weaknesses,

including their own. They had already anticipated the use of disruptors

and had prepared for it. They'd discovered that since the focusing crystal

of a disruptor is designed to handle ultrasonics, it was particularly susceptible to interference from infrasonics.' She closed the back of the

speaker with a smile, and handed it to Benny. 'When I give the word, point

this towards them and press the power cables into their connectors.'

Benny nodded slowly as realization dawned. 'Ready when you are.'

Ace drew her blaster. 'Now!'

Benny pressed the cable to its connector at the back of the speaker, and held it firmly in place as she directed it around the door-jamb. No sound came from it that she could hear, but she could feel a disconcerting numbness crawling up her arms.

The effect on the Ph'Sor was more dramatic. The disruptor of the nearest one exploded without warning, bathing him in fire and sending him running with a scream towards the pool. The others barely had time to toss their weapons aside before they too exploded in a shower of sparks. Most of the Ph'Sor scattered, policemen running after them. Two rolled for cover, however, picking up their Thompsons.

Benny suspected that Ace had been waiting for this, and her feeling

way as his wallet tried to hide itself any time his ex-wife called. His brain was already gearing up to ignore the words which, he knew with a terrible

clarity, were about to be inflicted on him.

'I mean a secret US aircraft codenamed Snowbird, which has been developed by a research team who have gone a little astray.'

Ken Andrews had always considered himself a laid-back kind of guy. His

'I've never heard such-US? Some of our scientists have finally

parents had brought him up by spouting sayings like 'it's no use crying flipped?'

over spilt milk'; there had been nothing about a spilt world, caused by the

'A major and a captain, actually. They've certainly got above

radio newsflash about the Russians having launched an artificial satellite. themselves.'

Andrews just didn't know what the world was coming to.

'You know,' Andrews breathed in relief. 'I was sure you were going to

Even in troubled circumstances like these, Andrews tried hard to retain say flying saucers.'

his easy-going ways. Not getting worked up about things was an

'As it happenes, Snowbird is discoid,' the Doctor informed him

important qualification, he felt, for being the director of a power station. It cheerfully. 'I'm going to need your help to recover it from its current crew.'

wasn't so much the dangers that such huge machinery implied which

'What do you need?' Andrews asked eagerly. He had been getting

risked his calmness as the pressures from local businesses, all of whom annoyed with the constant press exposure of these crazies who claimed sought to blame him personally when a circuit-breaker tripped and shut to have met Venusians, and the chance to prove that these flying saucers them down for a few minutes. Andrews had fielded all of these problems were man-made was something he'd give his right arm for. This'll show with equanimity through his career, strain passing over and from him like those nuts, he thought.

water from a duck's back. He always ascribed this trait more to his experience as a logistics officer during the war than to his upbringing.

The first joyous rush of Marion's new-found confidence was ebbing as she

He didn't mind admitting, however, that the thought of something

sadly watched the MO supervising Finney's transfer to the medical wing.

Russian zipping around the entire world was disturbing, and somehow Her pride in having a new position was being weighed down by the tone irritating. Five minutes after the security guards announced that they had of the unpleasant duty she had to perform now. She began to think that captured an intruder in B Hall, Andrews felt his ulcer was a guaranteed she almost preferred being a self-confessed nobody, hiding in the certainty. Not only had the strange little man called the head of the CIA at backwaters of the press office.

home with impunity, but Andrews had then been instructed to give him

The Doctor had shown her that there was more to life, all right, but the

any assistance - 'however crazy it may seem.'

new material was by no means all good.

'Unless you let me get on with my business,' the Doctor told him Settling reluctantly into Finney's chair, Marion lifted the phone and without preamble, 'you'll be completely blacked out within the hour.'

began dialling. The Pentagon wasn't going to be pleased, but they had to

'Not possible,' Andrews protested. 'We have four separate overriding be told.

safety cut-outs-'

'Which are useless against a technology which can put out an EM Kreer stepped out on the *Jessup*'s deck to look around in the brightness pulse strong enough to fry every circuit-breaker in the entire state.'

of mid-morning. The shore opposite was green, topped by dark tarmac

Andrews had heard such fairy-tales before, and wasn't about to listen and concrete, which looked as if it was crushing the bank. He propped to any more. 'You're working with CIA, so if you mean Russians then say himself against the rail and stretched out, canting his head slightly with a Russians.'

grimace, as if his stretching was both involuntary and unwelcome. The

The Doctor leaned forward on his elbows, to fix Andrews with a gently flowing but one-way current of the river reminded him piercing look. 'I don't mean Russians, though.'

uncomfortably of Time's single course, and so he turned away, looking

'Who then?'

instead towards the city. To the north, the hazy aftermath of smoke

'Yes, well,' the Doctor smiled wryly, 'that's the tricky part.'

blurred the blueness of the sky. The image amused Kreer.

'To find out, you mean?'

The burly frame of Commander Tobey, his naval uniform seemingly

'No, I mean to tell you in such a way that you'll understand.'

painted on, stepped up behind him. Kreer gave no sign of noticing, his

'Or believe, you mean.' Andrews had seen the stories in the papers of gaze turning southwards towards the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. 'There has late and a nasty suspicion was dawning on his mind, in much the same been no environmental change since last night,' Tobey prompted puzzledly.

tramlines. The graviton field bends light around it whether you like it or

'I wasn't looking for anything new,' Kreer said pointedly. 'The past has not, but they can channel some of the energy out as either a focused most vivid images...'

graviton beam or an electromagnetic pulse. This thing here should feed it

'I've received word from the *R'Shal*. One warhead has been located back to them - their system should be vulnerable to that.'

and disarmed by the Doctor's companions. The other is in cargo storage

'Tzun? You said they were Americans!'

awaiting the aircraft that will take it to Moscow.'

'I lied to save time,' the Doctor explained crossly, trying to finish up his

'The guards from ground zero?' Kreer snapped.

work.

'Survivors are returning here, but by a circuitous route.'

'What are they, then?'

'Better safe than sorry? I will supervise the loading of the main

'Alien spaceships.'

warhead personally,' he said decisively. 'When the guards return, I want

'You must be crazy!' Andrews stepped back. He would have the

them held for me.'

Doctor's equipment disconnected, he decided, and him too if he objected.

'Very well. My people are warriors,' Tobey said, changing tack, 'but I

'Madness is relative,' the Doctor snapped. 'Mine certainly are, anyway,'

believe we should congratulate you on the ingenuity with which you he added. 'Here they come!'

acquired the warheads.'

In spite of himself, Andrews looked up as the humming reached a

'I've stolen things before,' Kreer stated dismissively.

peak. The brightening sky was suddenly obscured by a rippling shimmer

'Indeed, you are a superlative thief. The best in this world, perhaps.'

of refracted light, which darkened as the very solid metal disc became

Kreer laughed sneeringly. 'Oh, but there are finer thieves than I. Time, visible overhead and cast the roof into shadow. 'They've transferred most for example. Eventually it steals everything.'

of their motive power to weapons systems,' the Doctor explained. 'That's

why they can't maintain a strong enough gravitational field to bend the

The desert flashed past as a tan blur in the holosphere aboard Xeno's light around it.' Traceries of energy rippled over the glowing exhaust circle skiff.

in the centre of the undersurface as well as the three equidistant In the precise centre of the display, remaining unwavering as the hemispheres around it.

edges of the image shook, a tiny speck grew into the looming form of a

Shit, Andrews thought, all those crazy stories were true. Maybe they

squat complex. An expanse of glittering sapphire rippled gently behind a should let the insane out of their asylums to run the world. Shouts and dam beyond the solid brick and concrete forms.

alarms from below brought him back to alertness, to see the Doctor Glowing indigo glyphs hung around the immense building, flickering fiddling about with his machine. The square aerial was glowing faintly, but and changing as the building grew with increasing proximity. 'Jamming nothing else was happening. 'It's not working!'

range in nine seconds,' the turquoise-suited pilot reported.

'It just takes time to warm up,' the Doctor replied.

'Prepare to transfer energy to ECM circuits on my mark,' Xeno

Deciding that it could take all the time it liked, but that he was having

instructed calmly.

nothing to do with it, Andrews ducked back onto the highest catwalk in the

'Transfer locked.'

generator hall.

'Three, two, one, mark!'

Men were scattering below as red lamps flashed everywhere,

overloaded circuit-breakers tripping and forcing the steam turbines to cut

The Doctor hurriedly lashed a final cable to a hastily assembled piece of out. Men in protective suits scurried to and fro as safety valves blew, jets equipment on the roof of B Hall. The centrepiece of the device consisted of scalding steam blasting through the hall.

of a battered square aerial plugged into a bizarre art deco ghetto blaster,

Horrified, Andrews snatched a phone from the wall-mounted bracket

while a number of thick cables ran down to one of the generators below next to the door, which was connected straight to the control room.

via some small Tesla coils.

'Stabilize the turbines-'

A faint insistent humming was building up in the fresh morning air, and

Everything suddenly shut down as every circuit was broken. The

Andrews looked around for the source while trying to figure out what the turbine sound began lowering in pitch, only their momentum carrying Doctor's apparatus was actually supposed to do. He realized that the them on.

Doctor had managed to avoid giving any details of his plan. 'What does

that do?' he asked rather belatedly.

The skiff's crew monitored their consoles with passionless devotion,

'Tzun ships use a graviton pulse drive to ride gravity waves like memorizing every detail of the energy flow and its effects.

'Sensors indicate non-human lifeform,' a crewman reported.

tarpaulin-draped oblong shape out onto it. Kreer stood on the trolley bed

'Tzun?' Xeno asked in surprise.

beside the shape as it was pushed towards the Comet. As the platform

'Negative. Thermal scans indicate ectopic physiology.'

was raised to the level of the Comet's cargo doors, Kreer tugged the

'Is it Kreer?' Xeno queried. He knew the major was supposed to be in tarpaulin away from the shape.

Washington, but he was known to be unreliable.

He pushed the freezer-sized corrugated steel box into the aircraft, and

'Unlikely. I am receiving no communicator carrier wave signal.'

beckoned to two men in dark uniforms to join him aboard. Moving forward

'Visual display!' The holosphere's image focused in on a short figure on to the cockpit at they entered, Kreer fixed them with a steady look. 'You the roof below. 'The Doctor!'

have dealt with the Ph'Sor pilots?'

'All EM wavebands are jammed, Commander, but there is a disruption

'Yes, sir,' they acknowledged. 'We triggered their self-immolation after

in our EM pulse. A duplicate jamming signal is being reflected back to us killing them.'

in a feedback loop.'

'Excellent. You have your orders. Obey them.'

'Sound general quarters! Restore graviton power flow to cloaking level

and set course zero-seven-zero mark zero-eight-five.'

Long fingers slid across the onyx consoles. 'Helm not responding.

Feedback loop is dephasing our drive field.' The ship suddenly lurched

downwards.

'Stabilize!'

The ship plunged sideways. 'All systems overloaded and shutting down.'

'We must not be examined by human biologists,' Xeno reminded his

crew. 'You know what to do.'

Andrews watched in amazement as the disc slipped sideways and swung

round before finally slamming into the rocky plain, blue sparks coruscating

over its surface.

Below, the alarms stopped. Andrews was painfully aware that it would

be several hours before the generators could be restarted

'That was the easy bit,' the Doctor commented beside him. 'Can I borrow a few more bits and bobs from you?'

'Why not?' Andrews said, half-dreamily for the sake of his mind. 'What

for?'

'For the difficult bit, of course. Getting that ship working again.'

The wreckage of the burnt-out Hercules had been transferred to an empty hangar so that normal services could be resumed. A clean white DH Comet cargo conversion, long and slim with gentle curves, waited at a nearby loading area. Overalled men were busy carrying out fuelling and preflight checks, while two men in dark BOAC uniforms toured the plane on an inspection with emotionless professionalism.

A drab green cargo helicopter swept low across the river and over the airport. It settled down only yards from the Comet. Kreer jumped down from the side doors as the groundcrew pushed a scissor-legged trolley towards the helicopter.

The crew raised the platform of the trolley about three feet and rolled a

Dulles that the Doctor's party needs your assistance.'

'The director of Central Intelligence is a busy man, so that might take a

while.'

'Don't bet on it.' One thing Ace was confident of was the pulling power

of the Doctor's name with those who valued his help.

Ace had been glaring at the heavy door for some time before the lock

For a moment, she thought he was going to turn her down, since her

clicked and a man with a lean and firm, yet somehow not quite mature, claim was an unlikely one at best. After a few seconds, however, he face came in. 'So you're the one behind all the excitement at the nodded curtly. 'That's your one phone call, but if you're lying...' He left the Monument today?'

rest of the sentence hanging as he left the cell. Ace slumped back against

Ace merely cocked an eyebrow.

the concrete wall and muttered a general thanks to any world's gods that

He shook his head as if to clear it, and Ace sighed in exasperation. might be listening.

Obviously they weren't letting her go yet. 'A woman at the heart of all that

violence,' he went on. 'It's unbelievable.'

Riding the police motorbike that she had borrowed - she tried to convince

'Wait until the Seventies,' Ace muttered under her breath.

herself - from its former user, Benny had spent an hour discreetly tracking

'What?'

the fleeing guards southwards. Their car had entered the disused grounds

'Never heard of Bonnie and Clyde? Look, don't I get a phone call or of the wartime Naval Research Laboratories, and Benny had cautiously something?'

followed, trying to remain behind available cover.

'Eventually. Of course, as a possible fifth columnist, you're something

Quietly, she abandoned the motorbike behind a wheeled refuse bin

of a special case - not to mention an embarrassment.'

that was parked against a wall. Keeping low, she moved up to a pile of

Ace laughed in disbelief. 'Fifth columnist? For who - the Russians?' broken crates a few yards from the dilapidated building. Peering around Gradually, she realized that he wasn't even smiling, and tried to the splintered wood, she saw that the car she had followed was now remember what she knew of the Fifties from TV. 'You're not joking, are parked before a gangplank that led from a weed-strewn quay to a dull and you?' she whispered, gloomily recalling what usually happened to so-solid-looking ship moored on the river. The gun-turrets betrayed the fact

called 'embarrassments' in those old shows and movies.

that it was a warship of some kind, but it was relatively small and Benny

'Why else were you involved in a pitched battle in the heart of the estimated that it was either a frigate or a destroyer. There was no sign of capital?'

life on deck, but the radar antennae were rotating steadily and glimmers

'Trying to save your precious city. Didn't you find the bomb I defused?'

of light could be made out through several portholes.

'Oh yes. It was stolen from Holloman AFB less than forty-eight hours

The thought occurred to Benny that her quarry could have left the car

ago. Guess who's the number one suspect?' He leaned against the wall here as a red herring and be hiding in one of the wartime buildings. On with a relaxed air. 'Your comic-book explanations don't hold much water,' the other hand, she felt, with their superiority in numbers and technology, he continued. 'Wouldn't you rather give one that does?'

they wouldn't need to resort to stealth.

'That is a very long story, and one you probably wouldn't believe. Who

She knew that she could crouch there all day debating which way to

are you anyway? FBI?'

go, if she wasn't careful. The fact that she was unarmed was a major

'That's right; Agent Joe Manco at your service.'

reason to go back, but the importance of finding out what was going on,

Ace nodded to herself. She was certain he wouldn't believe the

truth, of plus her natural curiosity, led her towards the ship. Laying her mental course, and lying would be risky; but governmental aid would be debate aside, she acted on instinct, her body moving to the gangplank extremely useful. How to enlist it, though... 'I'm Ace,' she told him.

before her mind knew what it was doing.

'An ace what?' he asked.

Boarding the ship, she kept low. Since no one had yet spotted her, she

'Just Ace. I'm currently working under the auspices of one Allen Dulles, ducked quickly into the first hatchway she came to.

if the name means anything to you.' Sort of, in a manner of speaking, she

reminded herself silently.

Manco's mind was buzzing as he strode down the darkened corridor to

'And I'm Dick Tracy, and you're still under arrest.'

the cells. Something very strange was going on, as his recent

'Look,' Ace began impatiently, 'there must be some sort of line of conversation with the CIA had proved. Worse still, someone had a lot of communication between the FBI and the CIA. Call them, and get word to string-pulling power and, to his chagrin, it didn't seem to be him.

Nevertheless, he would follow through on this new twist of his don't need that much assistance - just someone to tell me where a Major assignments, regardless of his personal opinion. He didn't, after all, want Kreer hangs out while he's in Washington.'

to be seen as rebellious. He also didn't like losing valuable time in which

'What did you say?' Manco demanded, turning pale.

he could be piecing together the puzzle of Kreer's foreign contacts, of

'I need to know where a Major Kreer-'

course, but as his superiors were fond of telling him, he didn't have to like

'This Kreer, is he an Air Force Intelligence officer in the southern it so long as he did it.

sector?'

The officer on guard opened Ace's cell at Manco's wordless nod, and

'Yeah, you know him?' Ace asked suspiciously, tensing subconsciously

Manco stepped inside.

as she wondered if her release might be some sort of Tzun trap.

Manco smiled unexpectedly. 'That makes your story a lot more

Tobey moved smoothly to the security panel on the destroyer's bridge as believable - if only because everything odd that's happened lately seems an alarm chimed softly. Touching the control beside the warning system, to come back to him. It seems we've been working on the same case, but he brought up an image of a companionway on an upper deck. A female from opposite ends. Maybe we have some things to tell each other.'

civilian was moving along it furtively. Tobey tapped his communicator

'I don't doubt that,' she replied cautiously. He seemed to be okay, she

implant. 'Intruder alert on C-deck. Apprehend immediately.'

thought, and at least she was fairly sure that he was human, since all the

'Belay that order,' Kreer snapped, moving over. He looked at the image Tzun she'd met so far had blond hair, unlike Manco's brown locks. His in the holosphere, something tickling his mind. 'I've seen that face eagerness was a bit unsettling, but it wasn't something she could really somewhere before.'

fault; after all, he wasn't the first person to try to run before he could walk.

'She was at Corman - you saw the security recordings.'

The thought stung her guiltily.

'No, I mean before that. Never mind. I'll see to her personally. We don't

Manco paused as he sifted through a manila file. 'Did you, by any

want the bait eaten before the fish comes along.'

chance, come from Nevada?'

'Not originally, but last night, yeah.'

Ace had been escorted to Manco's office and left to twiddle her thumbs, a

'So you're the one who crashed at National, I presume,' he commented

guard outside keeping an eye on her while Manco went off somewhere. with a bemused look.

After a short time, she looked up as the door opened, and watched

'I always said I could fly; I didn't say anything about being able to land.'

Manco questioningly. 'You seem to have friends in high places,' he said

'Why did you torch it? So we couldn't get prints?'

with a trace of a disappointed tone, coming round to sit behind his

desk.

'Not exactly. There were some things of Kreer's aboard that didn't Ace relaxed in relief. 'A friend of a friend, more like.'

belong there. Smuggled arms,' she added, trying to think of something

'You must really be something,' Manco drawled, tugging a sheaf of that Manco would understand. It wasn't exactly a lie. 'We didn't want them papers from an inside pocket. With a sigh, he leaned against the wall and falling into the wrong hands. What have you got there?' she asked, tired scrutinized Ace as if weighing something up. Ace didn't care for the look of the subject.

at all. 'These are your release papers - all signed, sealed, and delivered.

'Photographs,' he answered, spreading the contents of the file across

I've been told - no, *instructed* - that, as a result of a lot of inter- service the desk. Shuffling them, he finally found one that showed Kreer himself.

string-pulling by the DCI himself, we're supposed to "render any and all 'This is Kreer paying a visit to the Interplanetary Phenomenon Unit as Air assistance necessary", as they put it. An empty office is being made Force Intelligence's representative at a monthly inter- service summit available to you over at the CIA building at 3024 East Street North-West.'

meeting.'

'It's about smegging time,' Ace grumbled. The history of her own planet

The picture showed a man, the sight of whom raised the hairs on the

was being threatened, and she didn't feel very helpful while sitting in a back of Ace's neck, stepping from a staff car. The Air Force uniform didn't cell. Admittedly, she didn't really want to blame Manco for anything. For confuse her in the slightest, as her eyes remained fixed in horrified one thing, he was doing his best under exceptionally odd and trying - fascination on the face in the glossy prints. 'Qu'valth!' she spat. 'The good even by Ace's standards - circumstances. More importantly, if the Tzun news, Manco, is that I know who he is. The bad news is that we are in screwed up Earth history, Manco could do no worse than die; Ace, on the deep shit.'

other hand, might never have existed. Having said that, she felt she would

probably blame him anyway, for the simple reason that he was here. Slipping quietly down the narrow companionway, Benny ran a hand along

'Look,' she said, a little more understandingly, 'I don't need a desk, and I the dull grey wall, her eyes following the ribbed cables along the ceiling to the simply formed speakers that would blare out alerts in time of battle. It

'Bernice Summerfield?' Kreer looked surprised. 'That's why your face

was all terrific stuff, she thought. There was an almost obsessive use of was familiar.' Ignoring her look of astonishment, he leaned carefully past metal, with not a single neoplast fitting in sight. It was wonderful, and she her and unlocked the door.

had to resist the urge to take notes as she went.

'Your parlour, I presume.'

Something began to intrude itself into her mind, however, distracting

Kreer indicated that she should enter, and there didn't seem to be her from her gleeful examination of the fascinatingly primitive structure of much choice. She turned the handle and pushed.

the ship. Cocking her head slightly, she listened carefully, trying to single

The room beyond was filled from deck to ceiling with instruments that

out the sound that had piqued her interest among the jumble of other were clearly of local design and manufacture, reconfigured into bizarre hums and creaks of the ship. Despite the attraction of the long-forgotten and anachronistic networks. She recognized a few pieces of Tzun material and design of her current environment, Benny moved off further technology forming the central nodes of several linkages. A medium-sized down the corridor, realizing that the sound was coming from behind a black cat watched her impassively through luminescent eyes. 'Are all the closed door at the end of the passage. It was also getting louder.

white ones copyrighted?' Benny asked, nodding towards it.

It seemed to be a sort of echoing musical tone, with a strange backing

Strangest of all was some sort of Ionic-style fluted sandstone column,

that rose and fell. It was an oddly familiar sound, and Benny tried the which was totally out of place in the cabin of a destroyer. The weapon door, only to find that it was locked. For a moment, she was glad that the never wavering from Benny's midriff, Kreer ran a hand along the ship wasn't moving, or the rising and falling tone would probably have had weathered stone, his face displaying such satisfaction that she half-her stomach coming out in sympathy with it. At least you couldn't get sea—

expected him to light a cigarette like in the old movies. 'Sometimes even

sick in the TARDIS, she thought with a faint inward smile.

Time isn't such a successful thief after all,' he murmured to himself. 'Even

The expression froze on her face. That was what was familiar about with this primitive equipment, the Staatenheim remote-control principle the sound, she realized. It was like the TARDIS, but different somehow. works perfectly.' He turned back to Benny. 'I believe the usual parlance in Newer, she suddenly thought; that was it, not as worn as the TARDIS.

this era would be: "What is a respected archaeologist like you doing in a

It stopped with a bass crunch as if something heavy had settled down. place like this?" '

Benny bent to the lock, trying to peer through the keyhole, but the interior

'Do you know me?' Benny demanded.

of the cabin was pitch black. Pulling out a small dental scraper she

'Only by reputation,' he answered smoothly. 'I read your paper on the

normally used for scraping soft rock away from delicate fossils, she knelt foundations of Martian Feudalism.'

in front of the door. With extreme delicacy, she inserted the scraper into

'Nice to know I have some satisfied customers.' She smiled

the lock and started to feel around gingerly for the barrel.

uncertainly. How could he have possibly have read her work, which Abruptly a dull blur appeared in front of her eyes with a metallic rattle.

wouldn't be published for over half a millennium? A nasty suspicion was

It was, naturally, a set of keys, and she didn't need the Doctor's forming in her mind.

foresight to know that one of them would be for this door. Telling herself

'Your conclusions were all wrong, of course,' he added snidely, 'but not

resignedly that it wasn't as if she shouldn't have got used to this sort of by as much as I might have expected from a human.'

thing by now, she straightened slowly. Turning, she found an Air Force

'What?' Professional outrage thrummed in Benny's muscles, and she

major nodding understandingly. 'There can't be too many Air Force

almost took a step forwards, regardless of the strange weapon. 'How majors wandering around with alien friends and stolen warheads,' she could a twentieth-century Air Force officer have heard of me? Just who commented. 'You are Major Kreer, I presume?'

are you really?'

'I am many things,' Kreer acknowledged. He gestured with a stubby

'Hasn't the Doctor told you about me?' Kreer tut-tutted softly. 'He black device in his gloved hand. It looked to Benny like either a weapon or always did have a shaky grasp of the important issues.' His feral smile a sex toy, and she didn't think even he would consider this a proper time exposed pointed teeth amidst the neatly-trimmed beard. 'I am known as or place.

the Master,' he announced simply, then smiled to himself. 'Universally.'

He held the weapon steadily.

'Take me to your leader?' Benny raised her hands.

'I don't believe that should be necessary; I'm already here, miss...'

'Summerfield. Bernice Summerfield. My friends call me Benny, but you

can call me Professor Summerfield.'

'Do not let my apparent lack of concern deceive you. Shadow and I

have a somewhat unusual working relationship.' He turned to favour her

with a predatory smile. Benny drew back from his look, for now his hooded eyes were glowing internally with the same lucent gold as the

cat's.

The Master removed a small control from his uniform pocket and pressed

the single button on its surface. With a deep hum the fluted column split 'There's an ex-Navy destroyer, the *USS Jessup*, moored on the river open, the blackness inside swallowing up what little light was in the cabin. between the old Naval Research Laboratories and Bolling AFB,' Manco With a slight motion of the weapon he still held, he indicated that Benny explained. 'We've no idea what the Air Force could be doing with it and should enter the gap.

the DoD aren't saying, which means it's probably under a black budget.

Warily, Benny stepped through the doorway and found herself in a However,' he said meaningfully, 'we do have knowledge of Kreer paying TARDIS console room. Its design was superficially similar to the Doctor's, regular visits to the ship. We've intercepted phone calls between Kreer though the fittings were clearly newer, but the matt black decor gave the and the ship's captain as well, but we can't identify the language used.'

chamber a depressingly funereal air. The absence of the sorts of odds

'I'll bet you can't. Sounds like a good place to start, though.' Ace smiled

and ends of collected junk and anachronistic furnishings that encouragingly.

characterized the Doctor's machine as a home make this machine no

'Right. I can have fifty men ready-' He was silenced by a shake of

more than a barren and impersonal piece of technology, as lifeless as any Ace's head.

other tool.

'Take an army and the Master'll freak out. Increase the force, and you'll

Footsteps behind her announced the Master's presence. Benny turned just increase the bodycount - his co-conspirators will probably have round in time to see the cat slink past his leg. With a snap, the

Master disruptors.'

raised a fine gold pocket watch on a chain, spinning it gently before her

'Dis-what?'

eyes. Flickers of light gleamed on its curved surface as it spun. 'As an

'New weapons he's stolen from the R&D labs at Corman,' she bluffed.

archaeologist, you should appreciate this piece,' he said silkily. 'All I need is myself.'

'Eighteenth century, I guarantee.' He paused as Benny watched it. 'Listen

'Ourselves. This is my case, and my jurisdiction.'

to me very carefully, Professor Summerfield,' he said with surprising Ace sat silently for a moment. Manco was certainly no Dirty Harry and,

gentleness. 'You will hear only my voice. I am the Master, and you will by his own admission, mostly dealt with what would come to be known as obey me. You will obey me...'

white-collar crimes. This was not what she would have considered an

'Master, eh?' Benny rolled the word experimentally. 'A Freudian auspicious start to a probable combat mission, and she'd already seen far compensation, it is?'

too many fighters drop like flies in their first combat. On the other hand,

'What?' The Master looked momentarily thrown by the lack of any sign she reminded herself, you could never tell how someone would perform in of subservience on the part of his captive.

any given situation until you saw them in it. Besides, he was just old

'The name, I mean. I suppose it's some sort of domination complex enough to have served in World War Two or Korea.

that's arisen to compensate for some physical impotency?'

The most important consideration, however, was that - short of

'I see,' the Master said in a weary voice. 'Your inane opinions have no shooting him - there was little she could to to stop him going, while there relevance to Gallifreyan physiognomy. Stand over there and keep quiet,' was plenty he could do to stop her. She nodded in resignation. 'I'll need he finished dismissively, stuffing the watch back into his pocket as he my stuff back.'

turned to the console.

'We'll pick it up on the way out. You know, I'm risking ten years just by

While the Master's back was turned, Benny started sidling towards the not sending that stuff straight back to Corman.'

double doors, her glance falling briefly on the cat. 'One more step,

'I don't doubt that, but my stuff didn't come from Corman.' She thought

Professor Summerfield, and you'll be looking at Shadow from eye level,' for a moment. 'Why do you take that risk?'

the Master snapped, without turning round from the console. 'Surely the

'I've been lucky to get this far in the Bureau so young. If I'm going to

Doctor has told you of the effects of the tissue compression eliminator?'

keep up the pace, I've got to show I can take it.'

'I believe I've heard it mentioned,' she replied calmly, and stopped Ace nodded, gaining the measure of him as he spoke. This she could

moving. At least she now knew what the stubby weapon was.

understand, having felt that way herself for a long time. It didn't mean it

was right, though. 'There's an old saying that there are old soldiers and

Beyond the long range of windows, the disused airbase's empty

bold soldiers, but no old, bold soldiers,' she told him. 'That isn't true, but dispersal fields were slipping off to the left as the ship pulled away from there is a difference between boldness and foolhardiness.' She rose and her mooring. Below the windows were stretched rows of instruments, moved to the window, seeing not Washington but distant battles and which were tended by several men in navy uniform. Mounted in a central desperate gambles. 'You can be bold to survive,' she went on, 'or for position was a sphere with a holographic projection inside. Several touch-honour. Even because you're not really much good at anything else any sensitive controls glowed on the smooth panel at the base of the sphere.

more. But gambling to prove a point for personal satisfaction; now that's 'Tzun technology?' Benny asked rhetorically.

foolhardiness, and if the person you're trying to prove yourself to is

'Naturally,' the Master replied in a patronizing tone. 'An archaeologist

yourself... There are no old foolhardy soldiers.'

such as yourself should have at least a passing familiarity with the None of this seemed to matter much to Manco, who simply leaned artifacts of the Tzun Confederacy.' He moved to the sphere, bringing up a back in his chair. He smiled contentedly, cocking an eyebrow at

her. 'I series of diffuse images. Benny suspected that the holosphere's think I'm doing all right. This all makes a change from the fraudsters I'm projection frequency was attuned to the brainwave frequency of his own used to. I could get used to this.'

visual cortex - a common precaution in her time. As she moved closer,

Ace knew exactly how he felt; she had once succumbed to the same the image remained resolutely fuzzy, confirming her suspicions.

emotions. Unfortunately, she knew from bitter experience what the usual

'I know they never reached Earth.'

method of learning better was. 'No,' she contradicted him sadly, 'you

'Really? Are you familiar with the Nestene Consciousness?'

never do.'

'Vaguely. They control a sector of the Tau quadrant.'

'Did they ever reach Earth?'

The Master straightened after his examination of the TARDIS console,

'Of course not!'

stretching himself in an unnervingly feline manner before looking over to

'I suggest you ask the Doctor that same question when next you meet -

face Benny again. The eerie glow had faded from his eyes, but was still assuming you believe in some sort of afterlife, that is.' Turning to one of just discernible. 'The Doctor said you didn't have a TARDIS the last time the officers, the Master pointed at Benny. 'Chief, throw her in the brig. I you met,' she prompted, vaguely hoping that he might let something believe that is the correct parlance.'

important slip out if she could engage him in conversation.

'Now just wait-' Benny stopped as the officer drew his sidearm. Rather

'As you see,' he answered proudly, 'that is no longer a concern. It is than a revolver or automatic, it was a disruptor which he levelled at her also in perfect working order, as I shall now demonstrate.' Benny looked calmly. Surveying her immediate environment with a new and terrible towards the door in alarm. 'A short test trip only,' he explained in a clarity, she noticed something which had previously escaped her notice.

malicious tone that told Benny he was lapping up every moment of her

Though they were all individuals, every one of the officers present had

discomfort. 'I shall be moving us only a few minutes in time.'

eyes so deep blue as to be violet, and hair like spun gold.

With a smug look, he threw the dematerialization switch, and the glowing filaments of the time rotor began rising and falling. It slowed to a As the chief led Benny away, Tobey handed the Master a slim silver case.

halt almost instantly, and the Master operated the door lever. He gestured 'As per your agreement with the Triumvirate.'

towards the door with the tissue compression eliminator, and ushered

'Thank you,' the Master snapped disinterestedly. The case occupied

Benny out of the TARDIS ahead of him. Temporarily unable to think of a his entire attention, leaving no room for social niceties. Opening it, he felt better option, Benny acquiesced.

a glow of satisfaction at the sight of the gun-like hypospray nestling in its

She found herself stepping not from an Ionic column, but from a plain foam packing. A slim four-inch needle glittered dangerously from the metal equipment locker. She was still, however, in the Master's cluttered snout of the hypo, while a liquid filled a glass ampoule to its rear. A faint cabin. The vibration of the deck plates was enough to confirm that the silvery sheen to the ampoule gleamed richly, though it was difficult to tell ship was now moving, which it hadn't been before. That convinced her whether this was a property of the liquid or the glass.

that they really had moved in time. She just hoped it really was only a few

Lifting the hypo free, the Master fought to contain the trembling minutes, and not a couple of years.

urgency which threatened to overwhelm him. As it was, the contents of

The Master emerged from the TARDIS, tissue compression eliminator the ampoule rippled in his hand. 'This is the last?' he asked suspiciously.

in hand, and escorted her from the cabin. He led her through a series of

'It is. Surgeon-Major Ksal's geneticists have programmed the structure

cluttered grey corridors, eventually emerging onto the destroyer's bridge.

of the corrupted Trakenite DNA into the recharged nanites suspended in

that solution. When activated, they will deconstruct those gene

sequences

Slamming it shut with relief, she trotted back the way she had come.

and remodel them by reassembling the remaining DNA.'

The destroyer was small compared to the warren of corridors that made

'Which is my own,' the Master completed. 'No more will I suffer the up the TARDIS, and she felt confident of being able to find her way to a indignity of carrying the blood of that pacifist degenerate!'

communications room fairly quickly.

'The recharged nanites will give you your new life cycle, naturally.'

'Yes...' The Master moved off towards the door, his face a mask of The Tzun communicator which the Master had had moulded into his determination. He was halted by Tobey's hand on his arm.

USAF insignia, since he didn't trust their implants, beeped softly as he

'Don't let this lure you into forgetting the rest of your part of the entered his cabin. 'Yes?'

agreement,' Tobey warned, as the Master gave him an angry glare.

'The human female has escaped, one deck below the radio room.'

'Of course not. You won't free me form this planet otherwise.'

'Let her wriggle, and keep me informed.' Chuckling softly, the Master

'Exactly. One other thing.' Tobey wore a look of concern. 'Should we smiled and entered his TARDIS.

not have killed the human female?' he asked.

Inside, he took the silver case over to a flat-topped protrusion on the

'I thought the Tzun precepts taught that excess violence is bad for console and opened it up. At the touch of a control, two curved grips slid business,' the Master said, absently stroking the surface of the case.

from a hatch in the side of the protrusion. Clipping the glass ampoule into

'Of course.' Tobey paused with a frown. 'Sometimes it seems... the grips, he touched the control that retracted the whole thing back into unworthy of a warrior.'

the console. A translucent image of a cell structure immediately flickered

'I understand perfectly,' the Master said softly. 'The other Ph'Sor also into being above the flat top. Tiny symbols and glyphs danced around it, feel that way. I shall put it another way. If you kill the maggot before turning to remain legible to him as he walked around to view the other baiting the hook with it, it will not wriggle and

attract the fish. Professor side of the cell structure.

Summerfield is more useful alive.'

Pursing his lips, he tapped out a series of commands. Another

'To lure the Doctor.'

hologram appeared next to the first, which was identical in every way.

'Yes.' Tobey turned away as the Master moved to the helmsman. 'Take Allowing himself a slight smile, the Master shut down the displays and us to fifteen knots - I want to be in open sea by dawn.'

retrieved the ampoule from the console. Slipping it back into its mounting

'What of the ground-zero captain? I sent him to greet you. He has been on the hypo, he carried it over to a reclining seat near the scanner screen.

disciplined?'

The Master removed his uniform jacket and settled into the cushioned

The Master gave Tobey a condescending look. 'He has been form of the curved seat. Laying the hypo in his lap, he parted the shirt disciplined properly - as you should have thought to have done. It was a over his chest. Underneath was neither skin nor even hair, but smooth lesson his replacement will not easily forget.'

tiger-striped fur. Grimacing at the painful and offensive sight and feel of it,

he parted the fur to reveal a slim line of deathly white skin underneath.

Manco pulled the car into the roadside and squinted across at a thin trail Concentrating on keeping his gorge from rising, he let his revulsion and of smoke rising from the other side of Bolling's grounds. 'Looks like self-loathing at what was happening to him be consumed by the fires of they've set sail,' he muttered, reaching into the glove compartment for a anger. A blaze of hatred for the Doctor cleared his mind long enough for pair of field-glasses.

him to lift the hypo, placing the tip of the needle directly between his

'So it seems,' Ace agreed, observing the distant vessel through the hearts.

image enhancement facilities of her sunglasses. 'They haven't got up With a half-choked snarl, he rammed the needle home and pressed

much speed yet, though. Is there anywhere we can intercept them?'

the trigger. With a cry, his back arched in a spasm. After a few moments,

'This road meets up with Highway 95. That's the boundary ring-

road, however, his body relaxed and his face lost its contorted grimace.

so if we take a right we'll come out onto a bridge we could use.'

Weakly pulling the needle free and dropping the spent hypo on the

'Well, the least we can do is take a look at it.'

floor, the Master stood somewhat shakily. 'Now the nanites need only do

their work.'

As the ship's speed picked up slightly, the chief stumbled against the

bulkhead. Her surprised elation boosted by a sudden burst of adrenalin, Yet another blond crewman was manning the radio room when Benny Benny took the opportunity to shove the off-balance officer through the stumbled across it. The door was open, but the operator's back was to it.

brig door.

Watching, she noticed that he was sitting very straight; almost to attention, in fact. Not a crew *man*, she corrected herself, but another that he'd rather die. It was just such a waste, she felt. She momentarily Ph'Sor Tzun. Hoping that his earphones would muffle any sound of her wondered if he - whatever he was - had a family of some kind waiting for approach, Benny sidled up behind him.

him somewhere.

Her hopes were dashed when, just as she got within reach of him, he

Sadly, and unable to feel angry at not knowing how to operate the

turned in surprise. With inhuman speed, he scooped up a coffee cup and radio equipment, she began to experiment with the controls.

hurled it at her, forcing her to duck as he leapt from his seat.

Shocked and angered as she saw him reach for his gun, Benny flung Under the sharp autumn light, the waters of the Potomac appeared herself at him rather than straightening. Her head caught him below the mirrored. The river was silvered, while the lands around were burnished breastbone and slammed him back into the banks of radio equipment. He with emerald and copper tones, leaving the grey destroyer very much an dodged her next punch, leaving her hand to crash painfully into a glass intruder.

dial as he looped his headset flex around her throat. Her eyes bulged as

Ace watched as the *Jessup* approached the bridge upon which she

he pulled the flex tight with one knee on her back.

and Manco now stood. The car was parked on a grass verge at the end of

Instead of vainly trying to pull away, Benny jerked her head

sharply the steel and concrete structure. Manco had returned her blaster and backwards, feeling the bridge of his nose crumple under the impact of her wrist computer, and she was checking the charge remaining in the skull. While he was off-balance, she rolled over. He was sent tumbling, weapon as the ship hove into view.

his disruptor slipping from its holster and bouncing across the floor. He

'That's the one,' Ace pronounced, with a certainty she felt but didn't like

rolled with the force of her throw, stretching out a hand for the gun.

at all. 'I can almost smell him.' She knew that Manco would assume this to

He stopped short when Benny slammed a foot down on the small of be a hunch of some kind, but had to reluctantly admit to herself that what his back on her way to the weapon. The Tzun grabbed her ankle with his she said was true. She and the Master were the last two survivors of the outflung hand and she fell sprawling, as he pulled himself up to his knees. Cheetah Planet's effects to retain their own selves, and somehow the This wasn't far enough away to escape the vicious kick she delivered to heightened senses she had developed there could still scent him after all his face, her heel smashing into his mouth. As his head snapped back, this time. She knew now why she had felt the odd sense of 'someone Benny caught the disruptor in her outstretched fingers and brought it walking over her grave' so often over the last couple of days. It had been round to aim at his head.

so long since she had been able to track him from Midge's flat to the

He froze.

Perivale youth club that she had all but forgotten.

Benny also froze, though for quite different reasons. The radio operator

Looking towards either end of the bridge, she made a rough guess at

was bleeding profusely from nose and mouth, but there was no scarlet its height above the water. It was a fixed bridge, but the fact that the river stain. Instead, a watery yellow-orange pus-like fluid was oozing out to drip cut between two low hills at this point meant that the ship would just be on the floor. Filing that information away for future use, Benny gestured able to slip underneath at the current low tide. This is where a Dalek anti-with the disruptor. 'Now that you've had your kicks, you're going to tell me grav disc would come in handy, she thought. 'Do you have any rope?' she how to operate these antiques.'

asked a surprised-looking Manco.

The Tzun simply glared at her, raising a hand to his head as if gingerly

feeling his wounds. He suddenly gave a defiant grin and pressed the left The lieutenant manning the Tzun monitoring equipment on the *Jessup*'s side of his neck. Benny hurled herself aside instinctively, just as a bright bridge looked to Tobey for permission to speak as the Master entered.

flame enveloped him. Burning like a sodium flare for a few seconds, the Tobey nodded, and the lieutenant addressed the Master: 'I am detecting flame suddenly faded, leaving only a scorched patch on the deck to unauthorized signal leakage from the radio room.'

indicate that the radio operator had ever existed.

'Visual.'

Gagging, only partly due to the thick acrid smoke left behind, Benny

The lieutenant brought up an image in the holosphere that showed

picked up his overturned chair. Why did he have to do that, she Benny fiddling with controls. 'There.'

wondered, dropping wearily into the chair. It wasn't as if she was going to

'Has she had any reply yet?'

kill him, or indeed do anything more than lock him away in a cupboard

'Negative, but if she's unfamiliar with the equipment, she may not be

somewhere until his friends found him. She knew that armed forces transmitting a coherent signal.'

sometimes put out propaganda about what the enemy would to to

'No. A shame, really. Continue monitoring for another five minutes.

captured prisoners, and wondered if the Tzun had been so afraid of her After that, we'll assume no one is listening and lock her up properly.'

* * *

down the cable towards the base of the forward funnel.

Manco had only a single coil of rope in his car boot, but Ace felt it would

By the time she reached the deck, Manco had clambered down from

be strong enough to support them both. At her insistence, he had fixed it the roof to join her. Both of them looked around for any sign of defensive securely around the steel railing. Ace watched the ship's

approach, forces but no one came out on deck.

something about it puzzling her. 'Why isn't anyone on deck?' she

'I've got a bad feeling about this,' Manco muttered.

wondered aloud.

'You were the one who wanted to come.'

'Who cares? So long as they aren't around to see us. All that matters is

'I've got a lot to live up to. I can't let the Bureau down. Your friends are

that we succeed.'

obviously up to something.'

'Damn right.' Ace hoped her bravura would keep him in line, for she

'I know what you mean. They want us inside.' Ace's mind rushed, trying

had been wondering exactly the same thing. 'If any full-blooded Tzun are to figure out why the Master hadn't already had them surrounded by on board, they'd have to stay below, but the Ph'Sor and the Master should guards. Presumably it was because he knew they would have to go below be all right.'

decks, where they could be trapped. The question was, how to go in

'Who are the Tzun, Ph'Sor and the Master?'

without that happening?

Ace cursed herself for letting that sort of thing slip. It would still be best

Offhand, she couldn't think of any answer to that. Unfortunately, nor

if he believed they were dealing with human opponents, she thought. 'The could she think of any alternative action to take. 'The bastard's thought of Tzun and Ph'Sor are... Chinese tongs involved in arms-smuggling. The everything,' she murmured to herself. Meanwhile Manco had drawn his Master is a codename for Kreer - as in "criminal mastermind".' Bracing Browning and was reaching for the nearest door handle. Impulsively, Ace herself with a food against the rail, Ace tugged on the rope to tighten it grabbed the handle first.

and test the load. 'Good enough. Age before beauty,' she suggested, Manco may have been a couple of years older, but he was

motioning for Manco to swing himself over first.

inexperienced. Ace, as the more experienced warrior, didn't want to be

'Swell,' he opined ironically, grasping the rope and lowering himself responsible for anything untoward happening to him. She wondered if this over the edge. Above, Ace pulled on her gauntlets to

protect against rope-was how the Doctor - sometimes - looked on her and Benny. Being a

burn. Coat-tails flapping in the wind, she climbed down after him.

leader was a pain in the neck, she thought; what if I get him killed for

nothing? She dismissed the idea. If she started thinking like that, she

Tobey was first to notice the tiny figures dangling ahead of the ship. 'Most might get careful; and that would be dangerous. 'Fools rush in,' she told curious,' he murmured. The Master looked up at the sound of his voice Manco. Before he could respond, she tugged the door open, ducking and joined him at the window, a slowly forming predatory smile exposing back out of the way in case a shot came out.

teeth that glistened. 'The Doctor and his companion?' Tobey asked.

Nothing happened.

'His companion, certainly,' the Master agreed, feeling as well as seeing

Ace's presence. 'The other is not the Doctor, however.' He watched the 'If anyone is receiving, please respond,' Benny urged, twiddling some pair through narrowed eyes. 'She will suffice. Once we have both women, dials as far as they would go. Behind her, the bulkhead door opened with the Doctor will certainly come looking for them. Full alert!' As Ace and her a dull thud.

companion vanished above the top of the windows, a raucous alarm The Master, flanked by Tobey, stepped into the room. 'You needn't

started blaring.

pollute the airwaves any further, my dear Professor,' the Master told her.

'Your violent friend from Perivale is already on board, and on her way to

Manco was a few feet over the roof of the forward superstructure when rescue you right now.'

the alarms began. 'Jump,' Ace called to him. 'I'll get down the mast.'

'Which means you are now dispensable,' Tobey warned, coming

'Right,' he called back, letting go of the rope. He dropped onto the roof, forward with a drawn disruptor.

then rolled back up with surprising agility.

'Is that all people are to you? Disposable tools?' Benny snapped, a

Ace, meanwhile, was judging speeds as the mast rushed towards her. surge of outrage welling up inside her.

With a deep breath, she stretched out a hand to grab one of the power

'I'm afraid I am not yet finished with the Professor, Commander,' the

cables that webbed it, letting go of the rope in the same instant. The Master interrupted her. 'Once her violent friend had joined us, I will return sudden change in inertia whipped her round, winding her as she hit the with them to Corman Field to await the arrival of the Doctor's rescue mast. She managed to hold on, however, and determinedly started sliding attempt.'

'Snowbird will not be available to return you to Corman until tomorrow

The corridor ended at a flight of steps leading up to another bulkhead

afternoon,' Tobey corrected him.

door. Going ahead to peer through, Manco could see the array of

'Snowbird is unnecessary now.'

windows and instruments of the bridge. From the other side of the Tobey turned to the Master, a puzzled look on his features. 'What do bulkhead, a musical tone chuffed itself into silence and he heard a snide you mean by that?' The puzzlement faded from his face. 'Unless... No! voice say, 'Now that this is here, we only await your friend.'

That contravenes the terms of the alliance; you said you needed us to

Not wishing to engender any further delay that might allow his quarry -

take you from Earth.'

and his promotion - to escape, Manco shouldered his way through the

'I said I needed your help. There is a difference,' the Master admitted door. Ace followed right behind him, but Manco only had eyes for the two smugly. 'My TARDIS is already on board. I no longer need the Tzun uniformed men who turned with strange weapons in their hands. He Confederacy.'

squeezed the trigger of his Browning reflexively, hitting one man in the

Eyes wide, Tobey raised his disruptor, but was too late. There was a chest. The man crashed through the door to the flying bridge, as the brief purple glow from the Master's stubby weapon, and Tobey screamed. hollow zipping of Ace's blaster knocked the other man sprawling. The Worse was to come, however, as Benny watched in horror. Tobey's body second man's gun went off with a whine, shattering several windows.

collapsed to the floor, beginning to crumple inwards. Writhing on

the As the acrid smoke cleared, Manco kept Kreer covered, while the
ground, it twisted up with a series of popping cracks. In seconds,
Tobey bearded criminal's own weapon was still trained on Benny.
was a gnarled twig of a figure, no bigger than the fallen disruptor
which
lay beside him.
Inside the Master's TARDIS, Shadow hissed to herself as the
Master's
Laughing softly, the Master moved the tissue compression
eliminator dilemma was echoed in her awareness. Allowing herself to
be influenced to cover Benny. 'Now you are coming with me to see
your friend, by his presence at the back of her mind, she leapt up onto
the console, Professor Summerfield.'
slinking along the door-lever. The lever tilted, and the double
doors
'I'm not going to help you,' Benny warned him defiantly. 'And Ace
sure hummed open.
as hell won't.'
' *Au contraire*; your very presence is exactly the help I need.'
Ace prodded the fallen Ph'Sor with her boot, while keeping the
Master
'I don't see how; I'm not a psychiatrist.'
covered. Behind her, the door of an equipment locker suddenly
swung
'My patience is running thin,' the Master snapped. 'I only need one
of ajar.
you alive.'
Satisfied that the two aliens were out of the picture, Ace grinned
down
at Benny, who had flung herself to the floor when the shooting
started.
Manco watched uneasily as Ace peered around the corner ahead of
'Ever heard of a stitch in time?' Benny asked.
them. She suddenly slipped back, flattening herself against the
wall. As
'I knew you could look after yourself okay until we got here.'
he did the same, he saw Kreer going past the junction, holding a
woman
'I'll resist the urge to argue that point. We'll have to do something
about
at the point of some sort of weapon.
your "shoot first and ask questions later" lack of diplomacy,
though.'
When they had passed out of sight, Manco quietly joined Ace at

the

'Ooeeooeeooo,' Ace whistled in reply.

corner. 'Was that your friend?' He couldn't keep the grimness out of his

The Master looked around at the three grim faces that boxed him in,

voice, disappointed that even Kreer wasn't above such tactics as his lip quirking upwards in a sneer, as if he was amused at the turn of abducting women.

events. It was the sort of holier-than-thou smugness that Ace associated

'Yeah, that was Benny.' Ace's eyes had a dangerously feral look about with certain politicians whom she'd like to punch on sight. 'Shall I assume them as she glared down the corridor. 'When we confront the Master, you that you have me where you want me, and thus dispense with the formal may want to just shoot him, since I doubt you could hold him. The British platitudes of the situation?'

government couldn't, at any rate.'

'Perfectly correct, furface,' Ace replied.

'I'll bear that thought in mind.' Manco wondered quietly whether he

'And I imagine you will wish to know what I have planned for the could shoot someone in cold blood, and resolved to try not to find out. remaining warhead?'

Justice had to be seen to be done, especially if it was to get him

'If it doesn't destroy Moscow, you mean? The thought had occurred. To

promoted. He followed Ace along the corridor with a light head and a which, no doubt, you'll refuse to answer.'

heavy heart.

'Not at all, my dear.' He smiled malevolently. With a flick of the wrist,

he produced a flat black box, not unlike a TV remote control. Manco the memory of the lifeless and accusing faces of Paul Richmann and all stepped back slightly at the movement. 'If you believe the warhead is the others whose lives she had helped to end, for good or for ill.

aboard this vessel, then I'm afraid you've been reading too many of the

The Master, already close to the open locker door, covered Ace and

wrong thrillers. However, what I intend to do is detonate it with the aid of Benny with the tissue compression eliminator as he turned to dart for the this useful little device if you do not immediately lower

your weapons. dark space.

Who knows which city might disappear from the map?'

Even though the door was already open for him, Ace was fast enough

to shoot him in the dead-centre of his chest just before the door of his

With no one watching the helm, the rudders at the stern gradually began TARDIS closed over the almost comical look of surprise on his face.

to the currents of the river, turning almost imperceptibly. Almost unnoticeably, the destroyer began to move to port.

Shadow hissed as the Master was pitched into his TARDIS. He writhed

with pain as he crawled to the console, a trail of blood glistening behind

'If you need the bomb for some plan, Kreer, then you can't explode it him.

now,' Manco told the Master, thinking quickly. 'That means you're bluffing,

Reaching the console, he pulled himself up, his flailing hand managing

and that means you're expendable. Now put the box down slowly.' Manco to trigger the door lever, before pulling down on the dematerialization could feel the gun shift microscopically in his palm as a cold sweat switch.

interfered with his grip. He hoped that the Master wouldn't notice.

The kitling watched as impassively as only cats can as he slid to the

The Master's smile widened, and he moved his thumb over the single ground, the crisp stench of scorched flesh tainting the air.

button. 'I've got all I want from the plan - therefore, I don't care what

happens to the warhead.' Benny's foot suddenly lashed out while the Ace lowered her blaster and tried not to look in the direction of the tiny Master was facing Manco, and knocked the box from his hand.

remnants of Manco. It wasn't easy, and she felt sick.

The Master fell back against the ship's telegraph as Ace's blaster fired,

'Shouldn't we go after the other bomb?' Benny suggested gently. 'It's

narrowly missing him. Responding to the telegraph, the ship began to what your friend would have wanted.'

accelerate, throwing Ace, Benny, and Manco off balance. Ace and

Benny

'Probably.' She looked down wearily. 'Not that it'll make much

rolled with their falls to find cover, but Manco fought against it, trying to difference to him now.' Nor, she thought mutely, to any of the too-many bring his gun to bear. He was determined not to risk losing his quarry, but other friends I've left in the same position.

wasn't steady enough to get a clear shot. Braced against the telegraph,

the Master levelled his tissue compression eliminator at him.

The Master fought hard against the tide of pain that threatened to drown

The FBI agent had no chance to avoid it.

him, pulling himself onto his knees. 'So close,' he groaned, 'so close...'

Manco screamed as the cells of his body began collapsing against

each other with bursts of pain. His bones splintered as the unnatural Propelled by its well-preserved diesel turbines, the *Jessup* surged through stresses of the crushing pressure strained them beyond their limits, and the normally placid waters, a writhing mass of foam spreading out behind his brain burned as his skull squeezed in on it.

her as she headed for a bend in the river at her full thirty knots.

Ace looked on in guilty anguish as Manco's shrivelled form stopped Benny stared numbly at the place where the Master's TARDIS had stood, twisting at last. She looked murderously at the Master, who flattened until a sound from the flying bridge attracted her attention. She turned just himself against the side of an equipment locker. Almost imperceptibly, in time to see a blond sailor aiming a disruptor, and dived headlong into even to herself, Ace's finger began to tighten on the trigger of her blaster.

Ace, knocking her back into the stairwell as the shot shattered the Whether due to pheromones from the only other affected survivor of holosphere.

the Cheetah Planet, or her ingrained training and experience as a soldier,

Shaking off fragments of glass, Ace rolled into a kneeling position and

the coppery scent of blood in the air teased some forgotten part of Ace's loosed a round from her blaster. The sailor was blown off the flying subconscious, which hungered for more. She had failed in her bridge, to land with a thud somewhere on the deck below.

responsibility to keep her force safe, she knew, and reminded herself that

Turning back to the stairwell, Benny found that the bulkhead door was

it was her duty to avenge him.

jammed, but Ace blasted it apart in a shower of glowing fragments. 'Get

She fought down the primitive urges with visible effort, aided only by the hell out of here!' Ace yelled as she turned back to check that no one else was outside.

other three warheads in a chain reaction.

Benny hurtled down the stairwell to the shelter deck and threw open

The ship lurched, smashing Ace to the floor as the quartet erupted.

the nearest door. Outside, the deck was soaked by the spray thrown up The hostile sailors were caught by the fireball like leaves in the wind, by their sudden acceleration. Not waiting for anything, Benny dashed out.

while several lifeboats were blown from their davits. The shockwave knocked her blaster from her hand, and it rattled across the deck. She

Shadow drew back, startled, as the Master pitched to the floor in front of dived for it and was nearly too late, her hand catching it just as another her, his fangs bared in a rictus of pain. Grinding his teeth, he scraped at pitch of the ship sent it tumbling towards the edge of the flying bridge.

his chest with one clawed hand, pressing in with his fingers as if he was

Superheated air cloaked the superstructure, threatening to both roast

trying to tear out the pain that burned within him.

Ace alive and drain all the oxygen from the air. Above her head, the tripod

As he writhed on the floor, the illumination faded fitfully as the mainmast buckled out dangerously.

symbiotically controlled lighting elements died with their master's

Clambering back through the shattered bridge to the port-side flying

consciousness.

bridge, Ace kept a wary eye on the mast.

'Let... me... be... free...' the Master gasped, clutching his head as it

began to burn with a greater fire than the wound in his chest.

In the sweltering engine room, steam burst from pipes as the Ph'Sor Shadow watched silently, the tip of her tail twitching, as the burning engineers tried to stabilize the ship after the blast. The fuel-pump pain that was consuming the Master became visible. As if he were pressure was dropping, however, and they had to keep increasing power undergoing spontaneous combustion, dull fiery

embers lit the ravaged to keep up the speed. No one had told them to do otherwise.

Time Lord's contorted face.

Nearby, diesel oil sprayed thinly from a buckled plate in the fuel tank

bulkhead.

Ace kicked away the remnants of the door to the flying bridge and leaned

out, blaster at the ready. On the deck below, the fallen sailor lay with thick While his TARDIS's power source throbbed erratically, the Master curled yellow fluid pooling round his head, which was twisted at an unnatural into a ball beneath the console, his only thought to hide away from the angle. Ace thought the colour must have been a trick of the light, but pain. The fire in his veins was even worse than that which had seared his suddenly realized that the substance was pouring from the man's wounds. and Shadow's linked minds when leaping from the exploding Cheetah It could only be blood.

Planet.

As she watched, the man's hand slowly went to the left side of his neck

In front of his eyes, the material of his clenched gloves began to shift,

and pressed it in a certain way. An incendiary charge of some kind ignited bulging outwards under pressure from the flesh within.

immediately, the crackling phosphorescent glow rippling along his body.

When it fizzled out, only a vaguely bipedal patch of ashed was left. Benny had been edging towards the curve in the bulkhead below the Footsteps terminated any contemplation of the event, drawing Ace's main five-inch guns when she heard a footfall behind her. Before she attention aft.

could raise her hands, the ship had rocked like a wild horse and a searing

Several ratings were running towards the exterior steps to her level. blast had knocked her to the deck. For an instant, she thought she had Ace wasn't stupid enough to think she could take out all of them before been shot, but then she heard the anguished screams of the men behind they killed or captured her, and she looked around for an alternative. her who had been blasted into the water.

Glancing around in desperation, her eyes fell upon the quartet of torpedo

Wheezing a little in the thinned air, Benny turned to look behind her.

tubes mounted on a turntable between the superstructure and the

forward Blackened and twisted metal was smouldering all across the deck, while funnel.

flames licked at the paintwork. 'Ace over-reacting again,' she muttered.

Admittedly, she thought, this was supposed to be a retired ship. The Carefully she set off for the wreckage, certain that Ace would be crew were all armed, however, and knowing something of the Master... somewhere at the heart of it. Before she got far, three sailors emerges Deciding that the gamble would be worth it, she crouched below the plate from the doorway in the shelter deck.

armour of the flying bridge and sighted on the nearest torpedo tube.

Skidding slightly on the water-sodden deck, Benny drew to a halt in

Setting the blaster to maximum, she fired.

front of the disruptor-toting men.

The blazing energy bolt slammed into the tube, its heat and destructive

energy detonating the torpedo within. Instantly, the explosion set off the The pain began to ease, drifting off as if the consciousness that perceived it had dissociated itself from the form that experienced it. Gradually, light

* * *

began to seep back into the console room, bathing the sprawled and still He pulled off the gloves, examining the long pianist's fingers beneath in figure with a moonlit glow.

wonder. With a frown, he walked unsteadily round the console to the

'Free?' he murmured hopefully, in a light yet rich and cultured voice. nearest deactivated monitor screen and peered at the reflection it offered.

His eyes opened, wincing at even this faint light. He focused immediately

'I appear to have survived,' he muttered thoughtfully, then laughed to

on the hands before him.

himself in a tired and mirthless fashion that indicated that perhaps this

Through the tears that his claws had made in the leather, smooth skin was his least desired fate. As he straightened out, however, and put any was visible. 'No fur...'

such depressing thoughts out of his head, the laughter became more genuine and relieved.

Ace tried to pull back on the ship's telegraph, but it had been fused

by a

He looked down at himself, noting that his scorched uniform was too

disruptor shot. Outside the shattered windows, an old iron bridge was short and too loose by a couple of inches each way. Stroking the glossy stretched across the river just before a bend. It was a swing-bridge and mustache that didn't quite meet the neat beard which covered his proud was open, but the ship was already drifting to port and out of the safe chin, both of them framing his narrow mouth, the Master laughed channel. 'Not again,' Ace muttered.

triumphantly.

Popping back up from behind the port-side flying bridge's searchlight,

His high forehead and aristocratic nose tilted ceilingwards while his

Ace had a clear view of Benny's predicament. Unfortunately, her blaster's lean face cracked into a delighted grin.

charge level LED was showing virtually no power remaining.

Unhesitatingly, she snatched up the knife from her boot and clambered up Ace's mind echoed with an old quote that drowning was supposed to be a onto the bulldozer-blade shape of the radar antenna atop the roof. painless way to die. Whoever said that had obviously never tried it, she Leaning across to the nearest leg of the newer radar mast, she cut a thick thought blackly, as her lungs burned deep in her chest.

cable free and looped the end around her wrist.

Blue and purple blotches filled her mind until, with a searing glimpse of

Below, Benny was raising her hands and waiting for the shots that evening sunlight to match the renewed pain from her ribs, she broke would end her life.

surface. Reflexively, she gulped down a huge gasp of air, while trying

They never came. Instead, with a hoarse approximation of a Tarzan vainly to shrug off Benny's arm, which was adding to her ribs' injuries.

jungle-call, Ace swooped unstoppably past Benny's face and careened Coughing up filthy water, she finally noticed that Benny's other arm was into the trio, knocking them sprawling.

floating limply and the side of her face was starting to swell. It seemed

Pausing only long enough to deliver a right cross to one man who was that Benny hadn't landed any better than herself. A few yards away one of trying to grab her leg, Ace ushered Benny towards the

stern. As they the boats blown from the ship, scorched but intact and floating, bobbed in passed the after shelter deck there was a cry of anger from behind them, the turbulent waters.

as the men pulled themselves together to give chase.

Trying to tread water, and gradually succeeding as oxygen reached

The two women were running out of deck, however, and soon had to her muscles again, Ace looked for the *Jessup*. It was already half a mile swing themselves up onto the depth charge racks at the stern. Ace looked or more downstream and drifting inexorably towards the left-hand end of down at the glassy surface of the Potomac being churned into foam. With the iron swing-bridge. Clouds of smoke and the occasional blast of the ship going this fast, she suspected, the water would be as solid to exploding ammunition marked her progress. Suddenly realizing what was land on as hard-packed earth. She looked back over her shoulder to see about to happen, Ace grabbed Benny's uninjured shoulder, about to force the sailors charging along the deck, leaving her no choice.

her in the direction of the boat, but she was too late.

Heaving a deep breath, she hurled herself off the stern, catching a

With an ear-splitting preternatural shriek of tortured metal, the *Jessup*

glimpse of Benny doing the same.

tilted as her keel struck the shallows near the riverbank and her port bow

Despite trying to curl up as she fell, Ace hit the water half-turned onto powered into the foundations of the bridge. The ship's hull crumpled like her back. Her right side, leg, arm, and back all lit up with white-hot agony, paper while the girders of the bridge twisted and snapped, their severed and she felt a rib or two crack under the impact. She opened her mouth to ends scraping along the hull with showers of sparks. As the girders drove gasp a cry, only to be hit by a swollen mound of water from the *Jessup*'s deeper, they finally pierced the engineering decks where spilled fuel was wake. The force of the water spun her around, forcing her deeper under leaking from the tanks.

the surface of the Potomac.

In an instant, the sparks ignited the fuel from the ruptured tanks. A

vaporous firestorm billowed through the companionways, finally making

its way back to the fuel tanks themselves, which erupted in diabolical

flame. Before the sound reached the two women, the explosions had **Chapter 19**

caught up with the contents of the ship's magazine, detonating every inflammable and explosive mixture there. Finally, a series of thunderous

billowing explosions raced the length of the ship from stem to stern, Marion waved to Lieutenant Wood to take over the details of securing the ripping it to shreds and scattering fragments of red-hot metal across power station, while she directed her jeep towards the canted disc sitting hundreds of yards of water and riverbank.

in the green shallows at the edge of the reservoir.

The shockwave raced across the surface in a wall of spray, but was

Avoiding the gorse-like yellow bushes that thronged the shore, she

mostly spent by the time it reached Ace and Benny.

made her way down to the water. She wondered if this was what the

The roar faded, leaving silence, but for the slapping of small pieces of Doctor had planned from the start, and hoped that he was all right. No debris still raining down. There was barely a burning skeleton of the ship one else had arrived, other than the power workers of course, but it was a left, tangled up with the twisted ruins of the bridge. Ace and Benny swam sure bet that the media would show up if she didn't put a lid on the news.

- with some difficulty - over to the small lifeboat. Heaving themselves over

'Is the Doctor inside?' she asked Andrews, who was beside her in the

the side and into the inch or so of water therein, they lay gasping for jeep.

breath for several minutes. An oily taste hung in the air which wasn't at all

'He's been in there all evening.'

pleasant.

Ace felt around Benny's shoulder. 'It's just dislocated, I think. You know If there was one thing that the Doctor had correctly anticipated, it was the what?' she croaked.

difficulty of jump-starting the Tzun gravity drive with no more than a

'What?'

twentieth-century toolkit and a second-hand sonic screwdriver. Most of

'Next time, we should get the Doctor to take us somewhere more the toolkit's contents were scattered around the floor, amidst twisted wire peaceful and relaxing - Kursk, Narendra III or the Madillon Cluster, for clippings and scratched I-O chips.

example.'

Currently only the Doctor's legs were visible, sticking out from under

'Yes... It was such a waste of human - well, humanoid, anyway - life the dome of the matter-antimatter reactor. Triggering the screwdriver, he back there,' Benny muttered. 'Even if they were warmongers...'

tuned the reactor's anti-baryon feed. As he did so, the squat four-foot

'And a human life,' Ace reminded her darkly, with a heavy heart. She crystalline wave-guide chamber, designed to smooth out the gravity looked skywards as a faint rhythmic sound became more pronounced. A waves generated by the reactor, pulsed erratically with a hazy blue light.

white and orange-painted helicopter was descending towards them. 'Here

Without warning something shifted inside the reactor and the wave—

comes the cavalry to shut the stable door.'

guide chamber's glow died with a last flash as the Doctor scuttled back

Benny grimaced at Ace's mix of sayings. 'You've been hanging around out ahead of a cloud of acrid smoke. 'Bleep it,' he muttered after a brief the Doctor far too long,' she muttered.

internal struggle, glaring accusingly at the charred piece of circuitry he

held in his hand.

'Something wrong?' Marion asked, her voice still awed despite having

already been inside an identical craft. It wasn't something you got used to

quickly.

'A somewhat vague way of putting it, but yes. One of the magnetic

envelopes has shorted out.'

'What did it do? Before shorting out, I mean.'

'It formed the magnetic bottle that holds the antimatter away from the

normal matter of its containment vessel. Fortunately the Tzun reputation

for thoroughness seems to be deserved, as a back-up coil has kept the

magnetic bottle operating.'

'That's good, is it?'

'It's just as well, otherwise most of New Mexico would now be passing

the Tzun Stormblade in orbit.'

eye.

The wave-guide chamber was now completely dark, however, and the

The Master smiled. This was going to be too easy. It really was just like

Doctor glared at it with an intensity that might have ignited it if only he old times, he thought. 'I am Major Kreer,' he told them, pinning them to could have kept it up long enough. Finally, however, he tossed the ruined the spot with his gaze. 'You have seen my identification and verified my part aside with a sigh and glanced at an engineering schematic which identity.'

was displayed on a viewscreen. 'Perhaps if I reversed the polarity of the

'We have verified your identity,' they chorused sluggishly, as if they

neutron flow in the multicentre omnipolar diathermic phase-discriminator had been sleeping on duty and had only just awakened. They lowered and replaced it with an EPS tap from the...' He straightened, scratching their guns as if the weapons were too heavy to hold. The Master nodded his head. 'No wonder they could hardly be rivalled. No one else could gently.

follow the technobabble.'

'Good work, men,' he praised, humouring them. 'Now contact the Blue

Room and inform them I'm on my way in.'

With an echoing melodic warning, a gleaming black Edsel solidified in the

'Yessir,' they nodded hurriedly. The Master watched them good—

shadow of the looming dish at Corman.

humouredly. He'd hardly had such good subjects since the desperate Though looking much like any other car, the driver of this vehicle was residents of Stangmoor prison.

not perched in a seat of plastic-scented artificial leather. Instead, he stood

at the centre of a long room. A huge curved screen dominated the wall at Dimmed lights left strange, distended shadows around the interior of the one end, near the hexagonal console. A smaller, squarer screen was skiff. The haphazard skeins of wire and fibreoptics that threaded the flight inset into the opposite wall above a flat-topped console. Two passages deck merely made the misshapen shadows that much deeper and more disappeared around corners on either side of this, while a large unit inset bizarrely convoluted.

with monitor screens hung from the ceiling. A short passageway in the

'Came to see me off, did you?' the Doctor asked.

long wall to the left of the console led to a pair of double doors. All the

Marion shrugged. 'Partly. Radar tracked this disc's sudden appearance

walls were set with roundels, and the decor was still black.

and crash, and I didn't think the location could be coincidence.'

As the silver cylinder which was his TARDIS's time rotor stilled, the

'How's Finney doing?'

Master shifted around the console. He stroked the kitling absently, where

'Doctor Piper's taken an X-ray that shows something planted in his

it lay on a small monitor on one of the panels. 'Where is the Doctor that he neck. He's being kept under sedation until they decide whether to risk couldn't accompany those women?' He straightened his coat, an elegant operating.'

black tailcoat with narrow silver edging along the high collar and wide

'Tell them not to risk it; the Tzun will have thought of that, so removal

lapels. Buttoning it over his black silk shirt and midnight-blue waistcoat, might kill him. Keep him sedated, though. If he wakes up, they'll be able to he attached a silver pin in the form of a bird of prey with outstretched monitor and control him through it.'

wings to his billowing jade cravat. 'Surely the Tzun can hardly have The domed housing of the matter-antimatter reactor had been

overpowered him on their own?' he scoffed to himself. He threw the door removed so that the Doctor could separate it into two discrete units. The lever irritably and stepped from his TARDIS.

quantum charge polarizer which generated the antimatter was now linked

Carrying himself with energetic grace, the Master strode quickly across to draw additional power from excess life support, which needed to the tarmac towards the hydraulic doors to the S-Four area. Two obviously support only one Time Lord rather than several Ph'Sor Tzun. This, the human guards approached from the direction of the helicopter dispersal Doctor hoped, would mean that the magnetic envelopes wouldn't need to area. 'Halt and identify yourself,' the nearest one snapped.

actually store anything while a constant stream of generated antimatter

The Master turned and waved them aside impatiently. 'It's me, Major flowed into the reactor.

Kreer. Now do not obstruct me any further-'

Caught like a trapped fly in the web of wiring which criss-crossed the

'Impersonating a military officer is a federal offence,' the guard warned. flight deck, the Doctor slotted the last reworked I-O chip into the helm

'Put your hands above your head and walk ahead of us.'

console. Mopping his brow with the back of his hand, he delicately

'What?' the Master said, taken aback. 'I know I've changed my clothes extricated himself from the coils of wiring. 'And to think our old academy but... Wait a moment; surely I can't have changed that much?' Sighing instructors said neatness was what mattered. I'd like to see one of that resignedly, like an adult allowing himself to be subject to the whims of a supercilious bunch try something like this.' He looked round at Marion, as playing child, he raised his hands. The guards looked him straight in the if just remembering her presence. 'You'd better get back to your men, unless you want a trip into the lion's den,' he warned. 'The same rule Nyby stood in the Blue Room like a bipedal shadow when Shok'Arl heard applies - if you haven't heard from me by sun-up, get to Corman and shut his name called, but did not recognize the voice. There were only a the place down.'

limited number of people who knew his true name, however, which left

'Okay,' she acknowledged with mixed feelings, and turned to leave, only one possibility. This was confirmed less than a second later, when he then: 'Good luck,' she said from the hatchway.

turned to find an unfamiliar face staring at him from the midst of a very

'I make my own,' the Doctor reminded her. Hitting the door control, he familiar heat pattern. Shok'Arl's dark eyes saw this only marginally more sealed the hatch between them. He settled in something of a crouch on faintly than surface detail. 'Full regeneration was unnecessary for the the seat at the helm and played his fingers over the smooth touch-DNA reconstruction to take effect.'

sensitive surface. A hollow, echoing hum gradually filled the flight deck

'An irony we may both regret.' The Master shrugged. 'The girl Ace did

and the lights of the wave-guide chamber began to pulse falteringly this on the *Jessup*.'

before fading away.

'The vessel has been destroyed,' Shok'Arl admitted. 'The explosion

Grimacing, the Doctor gave the reactor housing a kick. The blue lights was monitored from orbit. Contact has been lost with all forward base came on more strongly, finally settling into a steady pulse. Heaving a sigh operatives. We anticipate that action may be instigated against this base of relief, he operated the controls. 'Station-keeping thrust. Excess power soon, but our Pentagon operatives will delay it with hyperbole until after build-up diverting to the conductive hull...'

zero hour.' He recalled what Nyby had memorized about the Earth's military procedures over his long career. 'So long as the Moscow warhead

Pausing a few feet from dry land, Marion ignored the dampness of the remains operational the plan will succeed. The loss of the Washington water's edge soaking into her trouser-legs. Her attention, and that of her bomb merely means a few minutes of delay between the Soviet missile troops, was fixed entirely on the disc. She had only seen a deactivated launch and that of this power bloc.'

one and a few pin-points in the sky, and was stunned at the image the

'Of course.' The Master nodded. 'But this proves I was right about the

working model provided.

Doctor and his friends. It's not too late to eliminate the Doctor.'

The hatchway had flowed shut as if the hull was water enveloping a

'On the contrary,' Shok'Arl mused, 'it is not only too late, but would also

dry patch. Now the ship raised itself a few yards above the green water be to miss a valuable opportunity.'

with a rising hum, the circular exhaust glowing faintly. As the terullian hull

'What are you talking about?' the Master demanded.

began to conduct the gravity waves generated by the drive, light bent

'The Doctor has followed Nyby's map to Elephant Butte, with the

around it. Rippling like a reflection in troubled waters, the disc faded from intention of challenging our presence on this world directly.' Shok'Arl's sight, though the hum remained.

voice couldn't quite hide the note of admiration.

'But that is the location of the last jamming exercise!' the Master

'Now,' the Doctor murmured to himself, 'up, up and away.' He triggered protested. 'If the interfering busybody were to prove that the Soviet bloc is the main thrusters. Silently, the gravity field around it shifting air not responsible for what is about to happen, the humans

everywhere will molecules smoothly aside so that there was no sonic boom, the skiff shot turn against you!'

upwards. Outside, the hum faded away.

'Wait!' Nyby interrupted. 'What do you mean about two bombs, and a

missile strike on us? And who is this?'

Marion looked across at Andrews, who was frozen staring upwards. She

'I am the Master,' the Master said loudly. 'You used to know me as

knew that it was her journalistic duty to reveal this event, but wasn't Kreer - don't bother trying to understand, it's beyond your pitiful foolish enough to fail to realize that publicity might alert Kreer and Stoker. intellectual capacity.'

Knowing that either speaking out or keeping silent would be a betrayal of

'It was expedient at the time. You will still receive your new one trust or another, she waved a sergeant over.

technologies, General, but your military and governmental processes will

'Debrief everyone here,' she ordered reluctantly. 'Inform them of the be irrevocably changed. Your tactical and administrative systems are penalties of a security breach, then post guards in all areas with outside finished, as you know them. From this time forward, you will serve us.' He lines.' She felt as if her tongue might swell up and choke her for saying signalled to a S'Raph, who pressed something to Nyby's neck. The this. 'Make sure that no word of this gets out. I'll have a debunking story general folded to the floor. 'Secure him in the quarantine unit.'

prepared just in case.'

'As you command.'

* * *

'If the Doctor tells anyone, they will not believe him. There will be no

proof of his story, as he is currently piloting the skiff into low orbit. *R'Shal* As he wondered if he hadn't misjudged his strategy a little, the growing

is waiting with tractor beams ready.'

object resolved itself into a gargantuan metallic blade, with a glowing pod

'You don't plan to kill him there either, do you?' the Master asked.

trailing from a pylon below. By the illumination given by lights scattered

'His DNA and RNA will be extracted and cloned as per standard like diamond dust across the shadowed underside, the Doctor could

see procedure. When these strands are grafted into the Tzun genome, the that the surface of the hull was as smooth as that of the skiff.

next generation of Tzun will have not only his complete memories and

The sword-like main hull was unmistakable and left the viewer in no

experiences, but also naturally grown symbiotic nuclei giving us total doubt that it was a vessel of war. 'I knew it,' the Doctor confided to access to time.' Shok'Arl looked into space, visualizing this proud himself. 'Tzun Stormblade off the starboard bow...'

moment.

'So that's why you answered my call,' the Master whispered Benny looked on with concern as Ace sat listlessly on the back step of the thoughtfully. 'You couldn't assimilate my DNA because it was corrupted, white and chrome ambulance. She didn't think Ace had a romantic but analysing it gave you the basic structure of our symbiotic nuclei.' He interest in Manco, but she certainly seemed to have had more than a glanced behind himself, as if wondering whether to remain or make a run passing interest. They had been more than a little alike as well, she for it. Shok'Arl couldn't tell if this was the case, as this new Master though fleetingly, and grasped the idea more firmly.

seemed calmer, less emotional and flustered. It was as if his whole aura

Was that it? she wondered. Did Ace see something of herself in the

was inscrutable.

young hotshot? She sat down on the metal step, ignoring the sombrely

'Do not fear, Time Lord,' Shok'Arl said gently. He knew that most suited men who shuffled back and forth in the evening air. 'Burden getting warrior cultures would kill anyone who knew their intent in such detail. He heavy?'

was certain, however, that such action would make no difference now.

Ace shrugged. 'I'll get over it, as usual. I've seen friends die before, but

there was no honour in killing someone for such a reason. 'We are an someone under my responsibility...'

honourable people,' he went on. 'We will fulfill our part of the bargain as

'Remember what I told you on the plane? Any good commander values

agreed. When Earth has become the newest canton of the Tzun individual subordinates.'

Confederacy, we will transport you unharmed to any place of your choice.'

'I'm no king,' Ace said pointedly. 'I'm not used to being a commander,

He paused, and smiled in his alien and inexperienced manner. 'Or any even of only one follower. I've always been a solitary hunter - it's what I'm time.' He suddenly looked ceilingwards. 'Yes?' he snapped. 'Excellent. good at - and sometimes I'll follow someone worth following, but I'm no Bring me up.'

leader.'

As the Master watched with pursed lips, Shok'Arl was whisked away in

'Not even of someone who finds you worth following?' Benny thought

a red haze. The Master half-walked, half-swam through the low gravity to for a moment, considering how to hasten Ace's return to normality. She the large world map. Washington was now unmarked, but a red line still knew it would happen eventually: everyone got over a death eventually.

terminated in a scarlet circle at Moscow. 'Decisions, decisions,' he They didn't have time to wait, however. She recalled that in the aftermath murmured with an ill-concealed smile.

of the Dalek missile attack which had robbed her of her mother, she had

brought herself out of it by busying herself with meaningless tasks. Their

The Doctor was shaken from the helm stool by a shudder that engulfed task here was anything but meaningless, but perhaps the same basic the skiff. Picking himself up from the floor, he glanced immediately at the principle could be applied. 'Where are we going to get transport back to wave-guide chamber. It pulsed healthily. Glancing across the helm New Mexico?'

instruments, his brows furrowed. 'Tractor beam,' he decided.

'From one of the company spooks, I suppose.' Ace straightened with a

The holosphere mounted in the flight deck of the Tzun skiff showed an wince. 'Then again, the Tzun will still be based at Corman - that's where expanse of stars. In the centre, however, one pin-point was growing the Doctor will be going, so that's where we should go next.'

slowly but steadily. The Doctor watched the forward view with increasing

'Excellent idea,' Benny agreed, relieved. 'I'll go and see what I can

concern

arrange.'

It wasn't often that he was overawed by mere technology, but the sheer scale of what was approaching impressed him. If the forward It was a shame that vacuum is so silent, the Doctor thought, as the tractor sensors were to be believed, and going by the arc of sky that was being beam swung his ship in a long curve past the main engines that formed obscured, the ship ahead was a good five miles long.

the hilt of the Stormblade's sword-shape. This really was the sort of thing

that deserved to have a very bass sound effect added by a team of ceiling. Several hawk-like gunboats squatted at the far end of the hangar brilliant audio engineers who had been supplied with some very deck. Mechanical drones floated all around the chamber, a handful hallucinogenic substances. Instead, the silence of the ship's movements coming over to link cables from a hissing compressor of some kind to the merely emphasized the cold and deathly touch of its purpose.

newly arrived ship.

The glow of the engine exhaust sank below the holosphere's range like

The air was a bit too thin for the Doctor's liking, and the gravity barely

a setting sun as the skiff was pulled up towards what could have been noticeable, but it was liveable. Looking around for a door, his eyes fixed considered the hand-guard on a sword. Ahead, the liquid-smooth hull on one of the many catwalks that circled the hangar. None was more than parted to reveal a lighted interior.

a foot wide, or had rails, but the nearest led to a circular door with iris

segments like those of a camera shutter. Hopping up onto it easily in the

Ace let herself sag once Benny was out of sight. It had been a long day, low gravity, he walked smartly to the door.

and the reinforcements sent from the CIA had seemed more interested in

The door irised open to reveal a number of diminutive grey-garbed

paperwork than getting after the Master, or Kreer as they still referred to S'Raph Tzun staring at him with cold, unblinking black eyes. All had him. Her ribs and spine still ached no matter how she shifted position, and holstered disruptor pistols, but none of them made any threatening she irritably waved away the paramedic who was treating her.

movement. Instead, they formed up on either side of the doorway,

like an

It came with the job, she told herself sourly. At first, strained muscles honour guard.

healed quickly, but when she put herself through those sort of situations

'Only S'Raph? Aren't there any pure-blood Tzun awake yet?' One of

repeatedly... Well, she had to expect that it would start taking longer to the S'Raph indicated with an inclined head that the Doctor should step pull herself together.

from the hangar and into the corridor beyond. He wasn't sure whether to

She knew that she could continue, to become what they called a be relieved or worried that they made no overtly hostile move.

'seasoned campaigner'. Those, however, usually had a base of

Considering his position, it wasn't as if they had to.

operations; a place to call home, where the weary fighter could recover

before going out into the field again. This was true in any time period. The full triumvirate of Shok'Arl, Tzashan and Sr'Shol watched the Doctor's She, however, had no such luxury, as the TARDIS could drop her off in arrival in the large holosphere in the war room, their features calm and another combat zone the moment they took off.

composed.

Face it, she told herself; you may be younger than Benny - twenty-

'Captain,' Shok'Arl called, and an inset display of the captain appeared

seven in a couple of months, relatively speaking - but you're getting too to one side of the holosphere. The captain inclined his head slightly. 'First old for this. In terms of bumps and bruises, at least.

Councillor. The vessel used by the Doctor is being searched and

She knew that, unless she found such a stronghold in which to lick her decontaminated. A security team is escorting him to the holding cells.'

wounds, there would come a day when the scrapes would cease to heal

'Cancel that order, Captain,' Shok'Arl instructed severely. 'The Doctor

properly. Some day the wounds would remain able to cause dull ached in is an important guest. Have him taken to the executive observation deck stormy weather or the like. Not this time, of course. It might be taking and post your guards outside. I will join him there soon.'

longer these days, but she could hardly feel the tingling that

seemed to

itch under her skin when her muscles started to unstrain themselves; but The short column of S'Raph stopped at another door, which irised open someday...

as the leading S'Raph touched a control beside it. The S'Raph with the

blue collar waved the Doctor through. 'You may use any of the facilities

The skiff insinuated itself through the atmosphere shield and settled into a here,' it said in a whispery voice. 'First Councillor Shok'Arl will join you support cradle not unlike a champagne glass, except that it hung down shortly.'

from the ceiling. An engine at the base of the stem buzzed into life and

'Thank you,' the Doctor said graciously, and stepped through. Instead

gently slid the assembly away from the landing area into a dispersal of the usual small cell with limited sanitation facilities, he saw that he was section. Beyond the atmosphere shield, the hangar exit vanished as the in a richly appointed chamber running for a hundred yards in either hull flowed closed.

direction. Fifty feet opposite the door was a wall of transparent alloy, Ringing tones that could have been alarms or normal background through which the Earth was visible at the tip of the blade of the main hull.

noise greeted the Doctor as he stepped out into the blue air. A number of From the fact that he could see the entire length of that hull, the Doctor other skiffs were cradled in similar supports growing from both floor and judged that he was standing at the front of the 'hand-guard'. The wall sloped downwards at a steep angle, but the Doctor could make out further as was the heat pattern. This man was diametrically opposed to the windows below.

Master, and yet Shok'Arl sensed a common bond - a sort of superior

Plush, if oddly designed, chairs and couches were dotted around arrogance which the Doctor seemed to control better. It was fascinating.

amidst glowing statues, holographic games and other unidentifiable and He ignored the insult: it was obviously intended to provoke him into ethereal objects. Several things with strings, tubes, or even light beams making mistakes. 'Can I offer you any refreshments?' he asked were clearly musical instruments of some kind. A row of onyx consoles conversationally. 'A small selection of Terran foodstuffs are available for with large slots in them was backed

against one wall. Ignoring all this, the the benefit of the Ph'Sor.'

Doctor walked to the window and stretched out a hand. The surface as as

'Everything in its place,' the Doctor said, shaking his head. 'Speaking of

cold as weathered steel.

which, this room seems a little out of place on a warship.'

Outside, the dark grey blade was edged with the quicksilver gleam of

Shok'Arl was puzzled for a moment, but then recalled that the other

terullian all the way to the point. 'They must need that to run along warrior races they had defeated tended to have very utilitarian ships.

tramlines of gravitational force,' he said to himself.

'Three of the greatest Tzun operas were composed by line officers

'I understand this is a closer look at a Stormblade than you had last serving aboard Stormblades. All minds, even those of warriors, must have time,' a carefully pitched and modulated voice answered.

time to relax so that they will not be worn out when going into battle. The

The Doctor looked round to see a being with hairless olive skin and a instruments and other recreational items here allow our minds to unwind supporting exoskeleton of tubes watching him. 'I knew there'd be at least freely, while maintaining the structure of discipline through the rules of the one pure-blooded Tzun in charge while you were in the theatre of games, or the steps necessary to play the instruments. That is why we operations.'

are successful.' He paused, seeking an example of a species who were

'I was awakened from cryosleep once we were safely through the more rigid and unfeeling. Many came to mind. 'Think of the Sontarans,' he system's asteroid belt. Allow me to welcome you aboard the Stormblade said finally. 'Devoted entirely to military matters, as are we. They, *R'Shal*, Doctor.'

however, have no relaxation, no time to let their minds develop. As a

'You seem to have the advantage of me.'

result, their strategy stagnates and becomes predictable. Their

'Not exactly. I do not know your name.'

exploratory parties have always been easy for us to destroy when they

'I've had many; which would you like? Some cultures feel that names encroach upon our space.'

have power and should be closely guarded; others feel that names are

'How did you manage to take over Corman?'

purely for tombstones, and I'm superstitious enough to consider that. You

'Take over?' Shok'Arl walked over to look out at the blue-green globe

remember me, then?'

ahead. 'We were given that base, along with a limited human support

'What was it you said at Mimosa II? "What goes around comes staff, as part of the bargain struck with a small group of officials within the around?" A curious phrase... We have a similar one,' the sharp-nosed Pentagon.'

Tzun went on, gently caressing a stringed instrument. It hummed softly.

'A bargain? I thought you were warriors.'

'Sit by the riverbank long enough and the body of your foe will float past.'

Interesting, Shok'Arl thought. That was precisely what the Master had

'How could you possibly know what I told Councillor H'Kauth? Tzun said at the time. 'As a First Councillor of the Tzun Confederacy, I have full don't live that long.'

ambassadorial status for diplomatic negotiations.'

'Indeed not. I am First Councillor Shok'Arl of the Tzun Confederacy,'

'And what does a warrior race like you know about diplomacy? the

the being acknowledged. 'But I share the memories of a hundred Doctor asked in an indignant tone.

generations of Tzun military commanders, plus many of their opponents

'Enough. The first Precept set down by R'Shal himself when he

and contemporaries.' He tapped the side of his skull. 'RNA grafts are founded the Confederacy was that the greatest honour was to defeat the updated with each generation. So I remember you quite clearly, even enemy without having to resort to fighting. If you are forced to fight, you though we have never met.'

have already lost the first battle.'

'It must be a little crowded in there, then, even with a head the size of

'Yes, there's a similar saying on Earth. That never stopped you before.'

yours.'

'Diplomacy is merely the purest form of warfare, Doctor; the challenge

Shok'Arl looked the Doctor up and down closely. This man was quite of mind against mind. Our military prowess grew and evolved with different from the tall and bohemian figure who had disrupted their experience until we were able to achieve the high standards set down in operations before. Nevertheless, the air of self-confidence was the same, the Precepts. Each victory we won led us closer to the goal of being able to defeat our opponents without combat.'

'Necessary communications equipment was assigned to him,' Shok'Arl

'Fancy words can't lessen the fact that you will still conquer other answered, trying to judge why the Doctor would ask this. 'The matter is races!' the Doctor snapped, pointing his umbrella accusingly.

irrelevant.'

'Races incorporated into the Confederacy are not merely slave races,'

'All right then. What makes you think the humans will make the right

Shok'Arl pointed out, somewhat disappointed by the Doctor's reaction. 'It decision?' he asked suddenly, as if on a whim.

is a mutual raising of both civilizations - a true symbiosis.'

'Our pilots have been making contact with randomly selected humans.

The Doctor nodded, his gaze firm. 'It's still removing basic freedoms The reports of these friendly meetings will generate a suitable image of us from those people you conquer. They don't have the choice of whether to in the public consciousness, which we can then exploit.'

become Tzun cantons.'

'A fat lot of good it'll do once those bombs spark World War Three!'

'Incorrect,' Shok'Arl stated. 'We do not conquer. Where is the challenge

'Why should we wish to instigate a nuclear holocaust?' Shok'Arl asked

- the honour - in destroying a foe who is obviously weaker? Instead, we plainly. 'The Earth is useless to us as a barren cinder.'

offer a partnership. We offer food, medical aid, technology - as in this

'Then what else...' The Doctor trailed off, looking back at the serenely

case - or anything else the world lacks. In return we ask only for floating Earth, dotted with light hazes across its dark side. 'Of course,' he volunteers to carry the seed of the Tzun species. As a side effect,

our breathed, 'you don't intend to start a war. You intend to prevent one! The genome is passed into their genetic heritage, but it works the other way two bombs destroy Washington and Moscow, thereby eliminating the two also.'

terrestrial governments with the most power to influence the outcome of

'What about these abductions? Were they willing volunteers?'

your arrival. Then when you halt the exchange of missiles with that

'We merely took cell samples to assess whether the structures were jamming field, you'll be welcomed with open arms for having saved compatible with ours. The subjects came to no harm and were returned to humanity from itself!'

their proper places, with memory wipes so that they would not be too

'Correct. We estimated a casualty level of no more than a million distressed.'

individuals world-wide. Now that the Washington bomb has been

'Or be able to claim that you were hostile.'

deactivated by your companions, the figures will be less than half a

'That is also correct,' Shok'Arl admitted simply. 'We considered our million.' He spoke dismissively, considering the numbers so low as to be treatment more reliable than the Master's hypnotic technique,' he went hardly worth mentioning. 'That includes those who will die in out-of-control on.'

vehicles when all terrestrial power is jammed.'

The Doctor whirled round from the forward view, both brows raised in a

'Half a million...! It's not going to work, you know. The Master has been

shocked expression. 'The Master?!' The intense look faded, and he double-crossing you all down the line. Your exploitable image in the public nodded as if kicking himself inwardly. 'I should have known. He told you consciousness will never come about, because he's been debunking your about myself and Ace.' Shok'Arl could hear no questioning tone, and contactees to make them out as mere lunatics. When you put in an remained silent. 'How did he get thirty-two years back in time without a appearance after a missile launch - even an aborted one - the human TARDIS?'

populations will assume you started the launch, and that the governments

'That you would have to ask him yourself, if it were possible. realized this and took action themselves. The culture shock will make Unfortunately,' Shok'Arl continued, with genuine regret, 'that will not

them so anarchically paranoid that they'll shoot at absolutely anything in happen. Once Surgeon-Major Ksal has prepared the medical complex, the skies! The whole of Earth culture would be sent reeling so far that it your DNA and RNA will be sampled and incorporated into ours. You might never recover. That's probably what he wants, in fact.'

yourself will be treated with our genome. You will become the first Time

Shok'Arl remained unruffled by this expected protest. 'If your words

Lord Ph'Sor.' As if the words were a cue, several S'Raph entered, forming were true, our operation would be under threat, However, the Master's a circle around them.

desire for his freedom from this world is sufficient to hold him to the terms

'One thing you can answer, then. What is the Master getting out of of the agreement.'

this?'

'Is it? With your level of communications technology and his own skill,

'His DNA was corrupted and fragmented. We have repaired it. He also he could easily send a message to his TARDIS no matter where it was.

requires transport off Earth.'

Triggering the remote circuit would be child's play. If I could prove to you

'Does he?' the Doctor asked slowly. 'You have an interesting level of that the Master has betrayed you, what would you do?'

technology; did you happen to give any to the Master?'

Shok'Arl's eyes unfocused, seeing the images and feeling the

sensations of events on many worlds. He recalled standing on the bridge

'Report.'

of another Stormblade centuries ago. Their local agent had alerted the

'All is prepared for the Time Lord.'

planet's military powers. He quailed in pain as the casualty reports

'Noted and logged.' Shok'Arl motioned the S'Raph guards to form up

flooded into the war room, and decided to hurl that pain back in anger. around the Doctor. 'Your lack of resistance is commendable, if surprising,'

The Councillor had looked over at the tactical major. 'Massive

ground—

he noted.

force build-up,' the S'Raph had reported. 'Orbital launchers being fuelled.

'You can transfer DNA if you like,' the Doctor said a little more cheerily.

They have adapted to jamming signal.'

'It won't work, but I expect you'll have to learn that the hard way.'

'Activate full graviton beam. Target staging areas.'

'First Councillor from Captain.'

'Targets locked.'

'Go ahead, Captain.'

'Fire at will.'

'A TARDIS energy signature has been detected at Corman.'

He watched as a line of distortion streaked out from the unseen

'Noted and logged. Sound general quarters and prepare for further

underside nacelle, and scraped along the surface of the planet. instructions.'

Conflicting gravitational pressures tore at the planet's tectonic plates.

'As you command.' A low gonging note sounded throughout the ship,

Cities fell and the seas rose. 'All enemy forces destroyed,' the tactics echoing through the observation deck. Shok'Arl made a pointing gesture officer reported finally. 'No life signs registering.'

to the Doctor, and the S'Raph marched him out. Shok'Arl was surprised to

'Report to S'Arl that assimilation of Kaldanati civilization has been see him go unresistingly, despite the obvious worry on his face.

aborted.' He tasted the bitterness of knowing that he - or, more accurately, Councillor Ph'Roch, whose RNA he was tapping into - had The Doctor was led to a sterile white room, and bade to sit on a stool. The failed, and left a destroyed and therefore useless planet.

lime-garbed Ksal checked a medical instrument of some kind. 'This will

Shok'Arl looked back up at the Doctor aboard *R'Shal*. 'We could cause no discomfort,' he announced.

destroy this world with ease, but without any gains the energy and He pressed the instrument to the base of the Doctor's skull, just behind

logistical expenditure would be entirely pointless. We could not waste the the ear. A transparent ampoule at the rear filled with pinkish liquid.

resources necessary.'

'Haven't you any out-of-date magazines for me to read?' the Doctor

asked

The Doctor paced up and down for a moment, obviously weighing up unconcernedly.

some dangerous decision. 'Scan the Elephant Butte reservoir area for

'The reference is irrelevant.' Ksal busied himself at the plasma-filled

latent artron energy. That will mark the location of my TARDIS. Once sphere, mixing it with a small amount of the fluid which he had just you've identified the TARDIS's energy signature, scan Washington, extracted from the Doctor, the rest of which was deposited in a smaller Holloman, and Corman for the same energy signature. That will prove sphere. Satisfied, Ksal returned to the Doctor and pressed the instrument that the Master has retrieved his TARDIS, and broken your agreement in to his neck once more. There was a soft hiss, and the ampoule emptied.

at least one way.'

'DNA only,' Ksal explained. 'It would be unwise to give you our memories

'If he has broken it in one way, he may well have done so in others as before you were one of us. It will take a little while for the full effect.'

well,' Shok'Arl agreed. 'And if there is no such signature?'

'Then it just means he hasn't had time yet. But it will be there. I know Shok'Arl took the captain's seat on the bridge. This would be unthinkable him far better than you possibly can, and treachery and deceit are as during a flight, when the captain was absolute master, but acceptable now natural to him as breathing. His mind's so twisted that he can't even walk since they were in stationary orbit. 'Have a S'Raph pathfinder team taken in a straight line without getting dizzy.'

by scout craft to a random location on the continental United States. Tell

Shok'Arl considered this. 'Captain,' he called, 'have the ventral sensor them to keep a communication link open to the bridge.'

arrays record the artron energy signature of the Doctor's TARDIS from

Now, he thought, we shall see whether we have the desired effect, or

Elephant Butte. Then scan Holloman, Washington, and Corman for the whether the Doctor is correct.

same signature.'

'As you command,' the captain's voice acknowledged over the internal The Doctor rose from the stool and circled the room, examining every communications system.

detail closely. 'Shouldn't I be on the bridge?' he asked, tilting his head with

'First Councillor Shok'Arl from Surgeon-Major Ksal,' a new voice a frown. 'I must be familiar with procedure.'

began.

'Excellent,' Ksal nodded unblinkingly. 'I will notify the First Councillor

that you are on your way.'

Shok'Arl ignored the Doctor's footsteps as he entered the central circle of **Chapter 20**

holospheres. Instead, he was listening unemotionally to the sounds of

cries and gunfire that were coming over the communications circuit.

'Do not engage the primitives in combat,' he ordered over the open A compressed red whirlwind sprang up on the catwalk in B Hall at link, searching his soul for its calm centre. He bathed in its relaxing Elephant Butte, the Doctor materializing in the centre. Checking that he influence as his distress and anger faded. 'Return to the ship at once.' He was alone, he grinned a little as he fished the TARDIS key from his turned to face the Doctor, glad to see that he was succumbing to the Tzun pocket. 'As you command,' he scoffed to himself.

influence. He had suspected that the Doctor's misgivings about the The red whirlwind appeared again, and Ace and Benny looked

process were merely the last gasp of resistance before bowing to the surprised that whoever they had been talking to on the Potomac riverbank inevitable. 'It seems your assessment of the situation was correct.'

was no longer with them. 'No time to stand around gawping,' the Doctor

'It usually is. The Master's goal has always been the acquisition of told them. 'We have to return to Corman.' Pushing the TARDIS door power, but he has a fondness for attempts to destroy Earth. Your plan open, he led the women inside and then busied himself at the console.

doesn't count in the way his mind works. I imagine he has some plan to

Ace cleared her throat. 'We've dealt with one bomb, but the other's on

destroy you before you can prevent the missile exchange.'

its way to Moscow.'

'He is but one man. I will have the truth of this when I return to Corman

'Good thinking,' the Doctor praised.

for the supervision of our withdrawal.'

'This receiver should home in on it,' she added, holding up the small

'Withdrawal?' the Doctor exclaimed.

box she had taken from the defused bomb.

'Integration of Earth into the Confederacy is no longer logistically

'First things first.'

viable. We could conquer the planet despite any resistance, but to do so

'There's something else you should know,' Ace continued. 'This Major

would destroy the very culture and genetic material which we intend to Kreer is really-'

absorb into ourselves. Without the promise of that prize, there is no value

'The Master.' The Doctor nodded absently, setting the time rotor in

to conquering the planet.'

motion.

'Well, well,' the Doctor said lightly. 'You've discovered the first non-

'You knew?' Benny asked suspiciously.

vicious circle. I expect it can be projected in advance in future operations.

'Not at first,' he admitted sheepishly.

Congratulations;

'How did he escape the Cheetah Planet without a TARDIS?'

'This vessel's continued presence here would be expenditure with no

'He's always been irritatingly resourceful. Ever since the Prydonian

gain. We will cease operations here and return to Zeta Reticuli.' He gave Academy, in fact, when he always managed to avoid punishment for the Doctor his alien smile. 'For now.'

misdemeanours of one kind or another.'

'For now?'

'You were at school together?' Benny asked.

'Humanity is of great value to us. When this matter is forgotten, we will

'More or less. His survival instinct has always been overdeveloped.'

return.'

'Not any more,' Ace said with grim satisfaction.

'I will have to recover my TARDIS.'

'What is that supposed to mean?' the Doctor asked, with a tilt of the

'That has been accounted for. The transmat co-ordinates are set.

We head.

will transfer you and your two friends to the vicinity of the TARDIS. You

'He had an unfortunate accident after murdering a new friend of mine.'

will bring it to me at Corman.'

She shuddered involuntarily at the remembered image.

'You have located Ace and Benny?'

'You mean you shot him, I suppose,' the Doctor reasoned drily. 'Well, it

'Their descriptions were noted and logged. We are monitoring them didn't work.'

now. Report to transmat engineering.'

'What?' Ace thought hard, recalling what the Doctor had said about the

'As you command,' the Doctor nodded.

other Time Lord after their encounter in Perivale in 1989. 'You said he had

passed his last regeneration.'

'So he had, but the Tzun have used their genetic engineering skills to

cure him of the DNA corruption from the Cheetah Planet. I imagine it was

mostly affecting the Trakenite part of his make-up. At any rate, they've not your emotions in check?' Stoker rocked back as if struck. 'A Tzun could, only made him a pure Time Lord again, but they've given him a new life-or so they tell me. You have been betrayed, it's true, but not by me. What

cycle into the bargain.'

did Shok'Arl tell you you were?'

'I am a human-Tzun fusion,' Stoker said proudly. 'Shok'Arl didn't tell me

The Master emerged from the pastel-blue corridor and gazed up at the of my past. I have the experience of it.'

unusual dish antenna set onto the rocky roof of the S-Four complex. 'All I

'No,' the Master whispered softly, shaking his head as if gently need now is the Doctor's assistance.'

correcting an errant child. 'Why do you think Ksal still requires genetic

Stoker clutched the handgrip of his disruptor like a talisman as sampling from the scouts? Because they are still testing how to fuse the Shok'Arl's voice whispered into his mind through the

communications net. species. You are no Tzun, because there are no human Ph'Sor yet. You

'Apprehend the Master at once,' he ordered.

are a clone, grown from one Tzun cell and one human cell taken from a

'As you command,' Stoker answered, then severed the link. The soldier killed in a past war. You can't recall where you were before coming disruptor seemed to be the only thing he could be sure of these days. The here, because you were nowhere. You,' he finished in a firm voice, 'were evidence of his unremembered presence on Earth was causing a only born six months ago.'

confusing pain, fed more by the wild mood swings he had been

'No!' Stoker clutched at his head with his free hand as he tried without

experiencing. Now he was told that their loyal ally had betrayed them. He success to remember something - anything - from farther back than six couldn't believe that Shok'Arl would lie, of course, but perhaps there had months.

been some misunderstanding of communications. A real Tzun would

'Your experiences are those of other Tzun, whose RNA was grafted

simply trust and obey, he told himself, but was bred as a warrior and not a into your growing brain aboard *R'Shal*. The anger you feel,' the Master spy. Stoker was neither sure nor calm, the realization of which fact made went on, with a prouder and more praising note, 'is because your human him yet more irritated. He longed for a simple straight fight.

blood-lust is overriding the Tzun DNA chemistry. This human ancestry

'There you are,' the Master said, turning to face him. 'Has the aircraft gives you a true warrior's heritage.'

taken off for Moscow?'

'What do you mean?'

'It has. I have orders,' he went on, 'to apprehend you for questioning

'Shok'Arl has betrayed you. Not deliberately, I'm sure, but perhaps his

over treason.'

brain was damaged during the long sleep between stars. You are but a

'And will you?' the Master asked, with what Stoker felt must have been tool to him, to be discarded once the proper human Ph'Sor can be bred.

deliberately deceptive lightness and calm.

But you have the training of the Tzun Confederacy as well as the

'I...' He raised the disruptor slowly, the Tzun training now instinctual. 'I emotional power of humanity - a race for whom butchery is as natural as must. I am Ph'Sor Tzun.'

breathing. Under the Councillors, the Tzun have become decadent and

'Are you indeed?' the Master asked. 'Are you certain of that?'

weak, but you could set the Confederacy back on the path of the true

Stoker froze. 'I don't understand...'

warrior race,' he suggested silkily. 'You could end this weak pussyfooting

'Oh, come now,' the Master encouraged. 'You've been wondering around of Shok'Arl's, and lead the pride of the Tzun warriors...'

about the photographs that prove you were on Earth before the Tzun

It explained a lot, Stoker thought. Admittedly he would like to crush the

arrived.'

life from those who had created him purely as a discardable tool, but he

Conflicting thoughts tumbled through Stoker's mind. A pure Tzun would was conditioned as a Tzun warrior. Anger surged through him on the have pulled the trigger by now, as a calm part of his duty. A pure human crest of a wave of tryptophane hydroxylase and washed away the calming would have pulled the trigger in anger. On the other hand, he thought, Tzun extra serotonin and training. The desire to make his own mark what if he does have the answer? 'They must be fakes. I remember being seared him. 'What did you have in mind?' he demanded. He might as well on other worlds then.'

weigh the plans of both the Master and Shok'Arl and pick the one he

'Name one,' the Master suggested. 'Tell me where you were before liked.

coming here.'

'Round up the remaining humans on the base and lock them away in

'Other planets...' Stoker said, but couldn't think of any specific the quarantine area, as Shok'Arl originally wanted. Then tell your men that examples. He had memories of the fear and exhilaration of combat, but I have a proposal to put to them and that they should obey your orders could not recall their circumstances. 'Somewhere else,' he groaned.

regardless of any unusual statements they may hear.'

'It's confusing, I know,' the Master said sympathetically. 'You can't keep

* * *

Shok'Arl walked into the map alcove in the Blue Room and studied the hospital ward was packed with men and women in various stages of large world map. A flashing red pixel was following the red line towards uniformed and civilian dress.

Moscow. He called *R'Shal* immediately. 'Recall the warhead delivery.'

'How do you set this to a cutting beam?' she wondered aloud.

'Not possible,' Tzashan responded. 'The Ph'Sor assigned to it are

missing, and their transponder codes are not registering. The Master The Master stood in the shelter of the door to the S-Four area, watching must have replaced them with conditioned humans. We have another to see who would discover him first.

problem.'

There was so much for him to do now, that even with virtual immortality

'Report.'

it would still be a race against time. Chiefly, of course, the Doctor had to

'The Time Lord nanites are destroying all Tzun genetic material in the die. It was a bitter-sweet thought, as he had no other such inspiring test tank. A S'Raph who volunteered to receive a test transfusion has adversaries, but he couldn't let the interfering do-gooder continue to died. We cannot integrate the Doctor's DNA or RNA. It is logical to plague his schemes. The two women were nothing, of course, merely two assume that he has therefore rejected our DNA.'

unimportant humans in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were

'I suspected as much from his willingness to comply. It does not matter, loose ends, however, and would be dealt with.

as our mission here has already failed. Issue instructions for all Earth

Then again, there was the matter of Ace, who had shot him. It would

stations to be evacuated. Prepare the new fused DNA structure for the almost be a pity to kill her, as her resourcefulness would have made her a Ph'Sor clones. At least they will have gained something upon return to the fine enforcer. As for her action against him, well, that was something he ship.'

understood. Any creature will fight to survive.

The only danger was the Doctor and his insufferably charmed life.

If he

The TARDIS groaned its way into reality in a deserted hangar. 'Where is somehow escaped to interfere again...

everyone?' Benny asked curiously.

Out in the open ground at the centre of the ring of rock and concrete,

'The humans will be locked away somewhere to await DNA sampling. windblown dust drew a delicate veil over the events there. The Master The Tzun will all be busy, since this would have been their bridgehead.'

could hear a couple of faint disruptor blasts - obviously Stoker's men

'Would have been?'

rounding up more humans, he decided. There was another sound,

'I'll explain later. Benny, go and find the humans and release them. Try though, which resolved itself into footsteps.

secure places like the glasshouse, or better still the medical section - if

Smiling in his sheltered position, the Master watched as a dim figure

they're dealing with Tzun they'll have insisted on a quarantine area. Ace, appeared from the dust drifting between the mountain roots and the gap you find Stoker, while I look for a connection to that dish.'

that led out to the runways across the dry lake. Dark coat-tails flapped in

the breeze as the figure folded back the garment's right hem, to keep the

Benny went straight to the map which Ace had found on their previous blaster-butt unobstructed under the hand.

visit, inside the doors of the administration block which grew out of the

The Master slipped back into the shadows as Ace meandered

mountain roots. All the major areas were marked on it, and Benny stealthily towards the thick and sloping concrete doors.

memorized a route that would take her straight to the medical wing via the

glasshouse and a large store-room.

Ace moved around the sloped concrete edge at the foot of the mountain.

She set off quickly, occasionally pausing as a Ph'Sor crossed the Inside, a pair of Tzun ships were cabled up to strange pieces of corridor in the distance. The blue store-room was filled with crates of equipment. Odd metallic shapes loomed like stick insects in the dim

light.

phased plasma rifles, but no humans. The glasshouse was empty. Benny She was about to move towards the nearest ship when a door slammed began to wonder what sort of architect had designed the all-blue complex. shut somewhere above.

Finally, however, she came to the windowed double doors that were the

She looked around and noticed a short stairway that led up to a small

entrance to the medical wing. Airtight rubber seals rimmed the edges, and office platform which had lights on. Even if Stoker was not inside, she two Ph'Sor stood guard outside.

figured, there must be someone who could give her directions, one way or

Not bothering to check the setting on the disruptor she had brought the other. Drawing her blaster, she crept up the stairs.

from Washington, Benny leaned out around the corner and swept the

Taking a deep breath, she kicked the door open and hurled herself in,

beam across both of them. They pitched to the ground, and she ran up to drawing a bead on the sole and relaxed occupant of the surprisingly the doors. Through the round windows, she could see that the miniature plushy furnished room.

She didn't really recognize the lean and aristocratic face, but the proud

bearing and satanic beard and moustache were as incriminating as a set

of fingerprints.

Chapter 21

'Good morning, Ace,' the Master said pleasantly.

Nyby waved two men to either side of the double doors, as a wide section

of them collapsed in a cloud of heated dust.

He knew he shouldn't have given the AFOSI men such a free hand

with their alien friends, and was adamant that if this was them trying to

make up for their earlier misjudgement by releasing him... No, he corrected himself. Treason, not misjudgement. He would waste no time in

proving that they were wasting their time trying to influence a man of such

strong character as himself.

Ready to face whatever might come through the doors, he stepped

proudly out in front of them. The doors slammed open.

Nyby was half-way through waving his men to attack when he realized

that it was neither Stoker nor Kreer who stood in the doorway. Instead, a

check-shirted woman with a mop of dark hair stood with a disruptor and

an impatient look. 'Well, what are you waiting for? she demanded in a

vaguely colonial accent. 'An invitation from the President?'

Several men immediately started for the door, but Nyby waved them to

a halt with a motion of one dark hand. Strangers shouldn't be waltzing in

and out of classified installations, he knew, and if she wasn't one of his

personnel then she couldn't be trusted. At least she seemed to be human.

'Who the hell are you?' he demanded sonorously.

'The crukking fairy godmother! Who the smeg are you?' She held up a

hand before he could answer. 'Never mind, Nyby, force of habit.'

'You're an unauthorized intruder, lady,' he rumbled.

'I'm no lady, and I've got authorization from Allen Dulles, if that name

means anything to you,' Benny responded. 'Are there any other prisoners?'

Nyby looked at her askance. Her unsupported claim to be working for the CIA was suspicious enough, but the claim of backing from the DCI himself was beyond the pale. As for her knowing who he was... Still, she seemed human enough, and had freed them. He could at least give her enough rope, he decided. 'This is everybody. Everybody human, anyway, except Kreer.'

'He's not human either, I'm afraid.'

The Master looked up calmly as Ace raised her blaster. Shaking his head, he tutted softly. 'You've already killed me once, girl,' he chided. 'Didn't you learn anything from that?'

'To aim for the head this time,' Ace said quietly, doing precisely that.

'I hardly think the Doctor would approve. Violence isn't really his style.'

'Well, I'm not him. When you've killed four, it's easy to make it five,' she

'My morality is always virtuous,' the Doctor retorted.

went on, Manco's tortured scream echoing in her head.

'Even if that implies that no one else's is?' the Master smirked nastily.

'That's very true, young lady, but you don't really want to do such a 'Of course,' he began, in a mock-thoughtful tone, 'you could try proving thing,' he told her in a gentle and patient tone. She didn't think of holding that.' With a sudden bound across the burgundy carpet, the Master his gaze, but nevertheless found that she could not tear her eyes from reversed the gun and slapped the butt into the Doctor's palm his. Smiling as he pinned her with his gaze, he repeated the words in a tone of confidential but increasingly firm acknowledgement.

Benny skirted around the edge of the two ships in the S-Four hangar, but

'I am the Master,' he informed her firmly, the confident smile never didn't look up to see the office lights. Instead, she opened the airlock wavering, 'and you will obey me.' He moved closer to her across the

rich doors at the rear of the hangar and plunged deeper into the complex in carpet, each word emphasized with a purposeful step. 'You will obey me.'

the lift.

Slowly, as if forcing its way through treacle, the thought occurred to her

She had already passed several rooms that showed signs of the recent

that the Master was not too dissimilar in outlook from most of her removal of their contents, and now ran round a corner to skid to a halt as superiors in Spacefleet. Though she was glad to be free of that group, it a figure turned to face her.

was certainly comforting to rely on someone to do the thinking for her. A

Benny froze as the cable-entangled figure emerged from the hydraulic

bit of discipline was something she needed to avoid becoming lazy. 'I will door to the Blue Room, the glimmer of his translator sparkling like Balor's obey,' she began slowly.

eye of ancient legend. She gripped the disruptor more tightly, willing the

Her time spent far from her native time and place, however, had not creature to turn away and return to its lair.

left her unaffected. While it would be comforting to obey orders instead of

'The weapon will not be necessary,' it announced in its rich, multitonal

giving bad ones as she feared she had with Manco, she could not voice. 'I have no quarrel with you.'

completely dispel the images that the Master's presence called up. Manco

'If you're who I think you are, then I've damaged your plans quite a bit. I

himself, for example, twisting and dwindling. Perivale's milkman, lying in doubt you'll want to give me a medal.'

torn shreds in the dust of an alien planet. Karra, transformed into an

'I am First Councillor Shok'Arl of the Tzun Confederacy. You are the

animal, then impaled on a dagger carved from the tooth of some great Doctor's companion.'

beast. There was Midge - always Midge - perverted by subservience to

'That's right,' Benny nodded. She looked at him in fascination. This

the Master, and finally left to die while the renegade Time Lord stood by was, after all, a living example of a species that had died out three impassively.

hundred years before she was born. Its movements were calculated and

Realizing with a start that this was exactly what she had just been precise, but she judged that there was emotion in there somewhere, agreeing to, Ace blinked and shook her head, which seemed to be fuzzy going by the way it stood to observe her actions.

and unclear. There was a brief but powerful tugging sensation, and she

'Your conduct was correct within the context of your understanding of

looked up to see the Master toying with her blaster. Her mind, however, the situation. I cannot fault a citizen for defending its home. The Doctor was still very much her own. 'If you hadn't killed so many of my friends has not succumbed to the influence of our DNA?'

before, you would have succeeded. Doesn't that tell *you* anything?'

'Not that I've noticed. I'd have thought that you'd want your own back.'

'Touché, and you have a right to be proud of your willpower,' the

'Vengeance is irrelevant; it cannot alter what is past, and is therefore

Master accepted graciously, 'but I'm the one with the gun.'

valueless.' It spoke with what sounded like a hint of amusement, though

'And you're proud of that, I don't doubt,' the Doctor's voice called Benny supposed that it could just be a translator flutter. 'You have come disgustedly from the doorway. Ace turned her head as the Doctor breezed to engage me in combat?'

into the room. The slightly built Time Lord, now several inches shorter

It was a thought, Benny admitted to herself. This was the leader of the

than the Master, looked around the opulent furnishings with a disdainful attempted conquest, after all.

expression. 'All very colourful, but shallow - a bit like its owner.'

'I heard you were leaving.'

'Former owner,' the Master corrected. 'As you see, I am a new man.'

'That is correct. Operations on this planer are no longer logistically

'Only in appearance. Your blood-lust is characteristically undiminished, viable. When I leave, the technology we had installed will be destroyed.' It or perhaps even renewed.'

moved on a few steps, slow in the Earth's gravity. 'Why do you

remain?'

'As are your increasingly hypocritical attempts at lauding the virtues of

It was just trying to safeguard its species, she reminded herself. And at

morality.'

least it was smart enough to know when it was beaten. She had to reluctantly admit that Shok'Arl didn't seem to be actually evil, just trying to

He was bred to fight, he knew, but here there were no opponents help the various branches of its people to survive. 'I'm just passing worthy of the trouble. However, he thought, with these ships to go where through,' she said finally. 'Looking for the Master. Why don't you throw me he wished... The cold knot loosened. Finally at peace with himself, Stoker out?'

walked forward to give his men their new orders.

'My people are warriors by necessity, but you have also fought

gallantly. I have no quarrel with an honourable opponent.' I'd love to see 'How did you get away from the Cheetah Planet?' Ace demanded.

this one meet an Ice Lord, she thought. They'd be congratulating each

'An, an excellent question,' the Master commented. 'I recovered my

other forever - what a formula for peace.

senses barely in time to transmigrate back to Earth with the aid of my

'Would the Earth's population have been honourable opponents?'

kitling, just as the planet exploded. Why Earth I do not know, though I

'No. That is why we must leave. We will not lower ourselves to base seem to spend an inordinate amount of time here. The planet's conquest for its own sake.'

magnetosphere, however, was rich in artron energy-'

'I see,' she agreed, and found to her surprise that she did. It was a pity

'I thought as much,' the Doctor interrupted, looking at the blaster as if

the Master had corrupted them, she thought. The influence of a warrior unsure of its purpose. Ace mentally screamed at him to give it back to race that had conquered its own urge to kill and conquer might well have her. 'That's how it was able to metamorphose living matter, much like a provided an inspiring example for humanity. 'For what it's worth,' she slow regeneration.'

added, 'I think you probably would have raised Earth civilization.'

'Precisely,' the Master nodded. 'That Time Lord energy source has

'A perceptive analysis.' She wasn't sure if that was an example of Tzun many uses. When the planet exploded, the release of that artron energy humour, or Tzun self-confidence. 'You respect the Doctor as your boosted my transmigration through time. Thirty-two years, in fact. The superior?'

irradiation had left my body filled with metamorphic energy, however, and

'As my friend.'

no one in this time zone could help. So I interrupted the real first Soviet

'I understand the term, though I can have no experience of it,' Shok'Arl satellite launch, and sent a signal to the Tzun canton on Zeta Reticuli continued, and Benny briefly felt her heart go out to it. She reined it in. Four. I knew their genetic skills would be sufficient to cure my... affliction,

'Tell the Doctor that my subordinates aboard *R'Shal* cannot eliminate the in return for assistance in integrating Earth into the Confederacy. I also aircraft with the Moscow bomb without risking detonation. He will have to needed help leaving Earth, as my TARDIS had remained on Antari Three do the best he can with that information. The Master has betrayed us, and when I had to leave Antari Two in a hurry while fomenting a war between so may attempt to destroy the telemetry link that keeps our scouts on safe them.'

flight-paths. He will fail, as it is trapped, but you may find him there. I will

'But you have your TARDIS now,' Ace prompted.

describe the route.'

'When I said I needed help to leave Earth, they assumed I meant I needed them to transport me somewhere.' He smiled. 'As for

Outside in the hazy sun, uniformed Ph'Sor were busy moving the two incorporating Earth into the Confederacy... There has to be a carrot at the skiffs out of the large S-Four doors, while others carried pieces of vital end of every stick. Why should I care whether they conquer a new world equipment into the storage areas aboard several other ships which had today? They've only got two hundred years left before they're wiped out.'

just landed in the central circle at the heart of the mountains.

'Then leave now,' the Doctor urged. 'The game's over! You have a new

Stoker watched with impatience as the work progressed. A cold life and your TARDIS back, so go and bother some other planet.'

sensation gathered in his stomach, silently sending out the image of being

'And have you follow me? Interfering as usual? I don't think so,' the
dissected for spare parts aboard the Stormblade since half-human clones Master scoffed.
would not be required once they left Earth.
'Then I'll have to-'
The feeling was unfamiliar, and at first he couldn't place it. The truth
'To what? Kill me, perhaps? Let's see.' The Master took the end of the
dawned gradually, however. The feeling could only be fear. It was not barrel between thumb and forefinger, and gently moved it until the muzzle pleasant, and grew more severe with each moment his mind dwelt on the came to rest directly over his left heart. 'Would this make it any easier, thought of returning to the Stormblade. If only he could think of a way to Doctor?'
avoid such a fate, he and his warriors could continue as before. The Ace thought that the Doctor should know that at such close range, the
Master had some sort of idea, but he was clearly untrustworthy as far as Master would be sufficiently damaged as to be unable to regenerate. The Stoker was concerned.
Doctor's eyes met those of the Master. 'Go ahead,' the Master mocked

softly. 'Look me in the eye. End my life.'
were blond, but not all blonds were Ph'Sor. He laid the problem aside as
'It isn't ease that's the problem,' the Doctor snarled derisively. 'It's his men rushed the guards, losing only three men to disruptor-fire. Nyby always been easier to kill, hasn't it, than to find a real solution?'
took one of the disruptors, then went into the armoury and started passing
'I knew you couldn't do it! Amnesty would be proud of you, even if you out guns and grenades.
don't have the courage of your convictions. If I were you, I'd have pulled
Regretting the decision, he made up his mind that the safest course
the trigger.'
would be to shoot all blonds first, and then ask questions. America's God
'I'll take that as a compliment.'
would know his own.
'Ah, how valiantly you strive to deceive yourself. Or perhaps to deceive

your young friends? "Two voices are there: one is of the deep - it learns Benny slumped a little when she emerged back into the corridor, relieved the storm-clouds's thunderous melody"," the Master quoted ironically. ' that the reduced gravity had returned to normal. Consulting the roughly

"The other is an old half-witted sheep which bleats articulate monotony. sketched map she had been given, she plunged deeper into the complex.

And both, Doctor, are thine." '

'I always thought that passage referred to Wordsworth.'

A silver flash lit up the Doctor's vision, but it was the Master who cried out

'You think I've forgotten how quickly you abandoned the idea of talking in pain. The blaster fell from his nerveless grip with a trail of blood.

to the aquatic branch of Homo Reptilicus in favour of blowing them to

Ace's bootknife clattered to the floor, its blade wet from scoring across

bits?'

the top of the Master's hand and the base of his thumb.

'You made sure that was the only way.'

Before the Master could move, the Doctor grabbed his wounded arm

'Sure? Are you so sure? All those deaths...'

and threw him off balance. He was hurled into the nearest table as the

'I will not kill in cold blood.'

Doctor bundled Ace back through the door. 'If we can get back to the

'Not even to end the threat of global holocaust? That's always been TARDIS,' Ace began as she hurtled down the stairs and across the your hypocritical problem,' the Master sneered. 'Willing to destroy at a hangar.

distance, safely shielded from the dirt that might stain your hands! Hiding

'Not yet. The Tzun are leaving, but we still have to make sure that

from the consequences, and too gutless to bring harm to face to face Stoker's men go with them.' He pulled Ace down behind some free-because you can't face seeing the last spark of a single life give itself up standing consoles that were left where the two skiffs had been. 'We have to your hand!' As if tiring of the game, the Master snatched the gun back to stop them being able to wander around Earth's atmosphere with from the Doctor's limp hands. 'At least I do

have the courage of my impunity, for a start,' he went on. The Master, with Ace's blaster in one convictions, and the strength to live with what conscience I have.'

hand and her knife in the other, burst from the office, and bounded down

'That can't be too big a job. Sometimes it takes more courage to deal in the stairs. Calling a group of Ph'Sor to him, he left the hangar.

life than in death,' the Doctor protested.

'How do we do that?'

'A tired argument, Doctor. I don't know if I'll ever find another such

'Gravity-drive systems are particularly sensitive to interference from worthy adversary,' the Master said quietly, in a tone which Ace couldn't gravimetric anomalies. Being an iron-cored planet, Earth has many of help thinking had the ring of truth about it. 'And I'll miss these little games those in its magnetosphere. So,' he pointed out in an overly patient tone, we have, but you've always failed to live up to your potential. I told you so 'they must have a ground station somewhere which keeps their ships at the Academy.' He raised the blaster to the Doctor's forehead. 'This is updated with where the safe areas are.'

the price of failure, Doctor.'

'That dish!'

Slowly and mockingly, the Master's finger tightened on the trigger.

'Exactly. I followed the connections from it, but they lead to a door that

I can't open. That's your department. If we can shut down that telemetry,

Nyby led his men out of the administration block and along the roadway their ships daren't risk atmospheric manoeuvres.' He looked at the open outside, ending up at a low blockhouse with two Ph'Sor guards outside. doors through which the Master had vanished. 'He's always been a little His mind was filled with anger at what had been done to him by those impulsive when you push the right psychological buttons. Come on.' He who claimed to be working with him for the security of America. He might rose and scampered towards the doors.

not be able to stop their plans, but at least he could take some of the

traitors with him, he thought darkly.

Stoker cocked an eyebrow at the Master, who poked his head around the

The problem lay in the difficulty of knowing who to shoot. All the Ph'Sor side of his TARDIS. 'Well?'

'Predictable as ever,' the Master crowed. 'He's making straight for the left a smoking hole in the grey wall. Lights flickered dimly on the other telemetry centre. Take some men and get in there through the passage side of the breach.

from my office.'

Beyond the hole was a sloping corridor that led down to a room filled

'We'll see that he's taken care of,' Stoker said reassuringly. 'Though I with machinery and electronics. Lights flashed brightly over the ebon can't see why you didn't kill him when you had the chance.'

surface of tall cabinets ranged around the walls while thick cables rose in

'Because I need him to do something for me first,' the Master replied a column at the centre of the room. A catwalk ran along one wall twenty vaguely, to Stoker's frustration. 'The imminent threat was necessary so feet up, with a door at either end. There was a door to either side of the that he didn't suspect that he's being manipulated. If he thinks I let him go, room on the ground level. The Doctor stepped smartly up to the console he'll get suspicious. I was beginning to think that young whelp was never that surrounded the column of cables as Ace turned on her heels, looking going to use her knife.' He wiggled his fingers, the red line across his around suspiciously.

hand only just having broken the skin. 'She probably thinks she's crippled

'Aha. Ace, this central console seems to be the master controller for me.'

the gravimetric charting. If I just...' He trailed off, shifting around the

'What is it you want done?'

panels of the console. Ace joined him, frowning as she tried to place a

'Shok'Arl booby-trapped the telemetry system when it was installed. familiar scent she had noticed when they entered the room. She watched Anyone who touches it dies, but I need it shut down.'

him work, and saw him relax slightly as he found what must be the master

Stoker nodded, then looked at the Master. Without the telemetry switch.

system, patches of gravimetric interference triggered by the Earth's Suddenly realizing what the smell was, Ace barrelled into him, shoving

magnetosphere would not be plotted as they writhed around the Earth's him aside. Triggering the silver egg, she rolled it towards the cable surface. Flying through it in a gravity-drive ship would be like

crossing a column. It detonated with a red flare, the console panels exploding in minefield in which the mines moved.

showers of sparks. Blue arcs of electricity writhed up and down the The cold gnawing in his stomach began again, and Stoker wondered severed cables before dying away with a charred stench. At the same what the Master really had in mind for the ships.

time, heavy blast doors slammed down over the passage they had

entered by. 'Sorry, but there was a smell like dodgems,' she explained.

Ace examined the edges of the thick steel door while the Doctor kept 'Does that qualify as shut down?'

watch. It was a simple matter to remove the door. Rather thank trying to

'No need to apologize,' the Doctor replied, picking himself up from the

blow the lock, which might merely jam it more tightly closed, she would floor. 'I should have expected a booby-trap from the Master.'

blow the hinges. Packing in some high-power plastic explosive around

'Indeed you should, Doctor,' the Master called down from the catwalk.

them, she waved the Doctor towards the thick legs of the dish. Joining With a clatter of boots, Ph'Sor appeared at every doorway and levelled him after a moment, she ducked behind the concrete post and pressed disruptors at the Doctor and Ace. 'You have been careless lately, haven't the stud on her wrist computer.

you? Actually, I should in all fairness point out that the electrical booby—

The narrow trench leading down to the door directed the blast of dust trap was set by Shok'Arl, to trap me.'

out in a fuzzy tongue that blotted out the purple glow of the pre-dawn.

'So you let us escape...'

A seepage of dawn light speared across concrete, staining it with

'Of course, old friend.' The Master held up his cut hand to show that it

bloodied shadows. Blackness flickered as Ace slipped through the narrow was essentially unharmed. 'I'm very familiar with knife uses.'

doorway that hung from its lock at a buckled angle. Her combat suit

' *You* want the telemetry system destroyed?' the Doctor asked.

creaked faintly as she looked around in the dim light. She had a small

'Of course. I have prepared a little gift for the Stormblade *R'Shal*,

which
silver egg in one hand. 'No guards,' she whispered.
I would be unable to send if the system was still operating. The deviation
'There should be some somewhere,' the Doctor replied, 'though the from the set flight plans would alert their suspicions. Now that there can system will be unmanned and automatic.' Barely sparing a glance for the be no set plans, of course, it's every ship for itself. I had, of course, empty hall they were in, he stalked over to the far wall and tapped it with intended that you die along with the telemetry, but there's an element of his umbrella. 'Hidden door, Ace. Blow me a nice hole in it.'
chance in every sport.' He looked at the guards, as if surveying a team he
'Right.' Squashing another blob of plastic explosive into the centre of had picked for a sporting event, Ace thought.
the wall, she moved back to the door. 'Fire in the hole.' They both slipped
The Master spread his hands in an apologetic manner. 'Now I'm afraid
around the door an instant before a hollow boom heralded the blast that we must part, as I have more important matters to attend to. Thank you for your help, Doctor, and please believe me when I say I truly appreciate
it.' His friendly smile hardened and cooled. 'Parting is such sweet sorrow,
don't you think? Perhaps I'll drink a toast to your memory - something **Chapter 22**
bitter-sweet, naturally. Goodbye, Doctor.' He nodded sharply to the guards.
Disruptor whines pierced the stillness of the room.
The Doctor and Ace threw themselves behind the wreckage of the console as the beam lanced through the room. Instead of passing
overhead, however, it bowled over the guards in the farthest doorway.
Ace darted across to grab a dropped disruptor as Benny emerged from
the darkness. Together, they opened fire on the catwalk guards. The Master vanished through the nearest doorway with a curse as the guards
jerked and toppled over the railing.
The silence afterwards was almost deafening. 'Where did you spring
from?' Ace asked.

'Shok'Arl has had more of a change of heart than his subordinates.'

She tossed the disruptor aside in distaste, preferring to leave that side of things to Ace, then looked to the Doctor. 'The Tzun can't recall the plane with the Moscow bomb. It seems the Master replaced the Ph'Sor pilots with conditioned humans.'

'And knocking the plane down would set off the bomb,' the Doctor reasoned. 'Come on, we can lock on to the plane with that receiver of yours, Ace.'

'What about the Master?'

The Tzun won't have anything more to do with him, and his cover's been blown in the military. I'd say he'll leave Earth, if he can, after he's finished his mysterious little vendetta with the Tzun. That's his usual technique, anyway. That warhead is a much more immediate threat to the planet; if it goes off, the Tzun won't stop the missile exchange.'

'They won't?'

'Why should they? It's purely an internal human matter now, as far as they're concerned.'

'Shades,' Benny grumbled. 'I'm definitely getting too old for this.'

The Master descended from his office and left the hangar with a purposeful air. The dry heat and neutral non-smell of the rocky area had previously seemed uncomfortable to him; mere reminders, in their way, that he was trapped here.

Now, however, he held his head hight, drinking in the rich and barren beauty of the ruddy morning tones as if they prompted some bitter-sweet memory within him.

His not-quite-shoulder-length hair ruffling slightly in the breeze that swept in through the narrow gap that led to the white expanse of the dry lake, he climbed inside the nearest parked skiff with smooth and assured movements.

If he registered Stoker following him in, he gave no sign. He

'No one is to leave this area until I decide,' the Master snapped. 'This

concentrated on making adjustments to the circuitry under the smooth ship is still needed.'

black flight console. After completing his adjustments, however, he turned

'We have been ordered, and so we obey,' the Ph'Sor replied,

to the other man. 'Do you disapprove of my destroying the Stormblade?'

continuing with his preflight check.

'Yes... No... I don't know,' Stoker confessed. He followed as the Master

The Master was nothing if not experienced in the means of snatching

left the skiff and moved onto the next one. 'What do you plan to do with power and guarding it closely. Knowing that anyone who hesitates is lost the other skiffs?'

and deciding action was the most important aspect of gaining his The Master paused, and indicated the hatch of the next ship. 'You subordinates' attention, he shot the Ph'Sor with Ace's blaster, blowing the have an idea?' he asked neutrally. 'Let's step inside and discuss it.'

smoking body across the flight deck. 'You will obey me,' he corrected,

moving the blaster to cover the survivors.

The Comet's course towards the USSR did not go unnoticed. A string of

'As you command,' the remaining Ph'Sor chorused.

early-warning radio stations detected it as it banked past the northern

'I appreciate your respect,' the Master said tightly. 'Continue checking

Norwegian province of Finnmark and turned south to cut across the Kola the remaining skiffs for the moment.' They filed out hurriedly.

peninsula. The individual unit commanders each called through the area

'You should have said,' Stoker protested. 'My men are trained to follow

commander of the Radioteknicheskie Voiska at Murmansk.

me; there's no need to kill them to make a point.'

One by one, he ordered them to take no action, and warned them that

'What does one Ph'Sor matter to me?' the Master asked in an

this was a matter which would be dealt with by higher authorities.

astonished tone.

He smiled at the thought, and reported to his superiors via his

'You were the one who-You lied about all that clone stuff...?'

subcutaneous communicator.

'On the contrary, it's quite true. I'm sure Shok'Arl would have found a

use for you, though - if he survived.'

Tzashan reclined at the centre of the globe-filled bridge, his attention

'Then I must make myself available, if he does have missions for us.

flicking from one holosphere to another in the blink of an eye. The captain You mustn't destroy *R'Shal*!' He turned to reach for the disruptor that was approached from the flanking sensor podium. 'All scout pilots are lying on a panel, and felt something numb his right shoulder-blade. He reporting failure of navigational telemetry,' he reported. 'Also, contact has couldn't breathe and felt as if he were gagging. Missing the disruptor, he been lost with forward base.'

sagged across the panel. 'Why did you tell me...'

'Order all scouts to switch to visual scanning. Despatch vessels to

'Confusion in the ranks. You've outlived your usefulness.' The Master's

assist in the evacuation of forward base.'

laugh was the last sound Stoker heard.

'The order to switch to visual has been given.' He bend over a read-out. 'Cargo skiffs are on alert. Launch will be in seventeen seconds.'

The Master bounded lightly into the black console room, turning a small

Tzashan nodded. The Doctor had said that the telemetry system would unit over in his hands before slotting it into a place on the console. A be the Master's first target. Could it be that this was some trick to make joystick popped up in front of one of the small monitor screens, which the skiffs vulnerable to the human military's interceptors? Or was it merely came to life with a display of the S-Four doors.

a malfunction? In any case, the skiffs would report back, but it would do

The Master pressed several switches and pulled back on the joystick.

no harm to redeploy his ships. 'Send to all scouts - return to *R'Shal* until The view on the monitor slipped downwards, as if the viewer were rising.

the cause of the telemetry failure had been determined. We cannot

risk

another downed scout which may alert the others humans to our The first skiff in the row outside, in which the Master had adjusted the presence.'

circuitry, hummed upwards. Gradually it rippled and faded.

The Master preceded Stoker into the ship, where they found several On the small screen in the Master's TARDIS, the golden dawn faded to Ph'Sor busying themselves at the control stations. 'What is happening purple, and then star-speckled black. Swinging around it dangerously, the here?' the Master demanded suspiciously.'

glinting blade of *R'Shal*'s main hull slashed across the sky as it grew.

'All scouts are ordered to return to *R'Shal*,' one of the Ph'Sor replied.

'Who gave the command, and why?' Stoker asked.

The captain of *R'Shal* entered the ring of the holospheres. 'Councillor, the

'Second Councillor Tzashan. The navigational telemetry is inoperative.'

first of the evacuation ships is breaking orbit.'

'Noted and logged. Carry out standard recovery.'

monitors hanging from the ceiling. Absently, he drew out the box which

'As you command. Hangar deck - engage tractor beams and direct controlled the phased radar array at Holloman, and pressed the button incoming vessel to docking bay 94.'

which shut down the inhibitor he had placed in its workings. 'A little extra

'As you command,' a voice floated from the darkness.

confusion for the skiff pilots.' Various views of Corman were displayed on

the monitors. 'Where are you, Doctor? I know you're still here; your The scout drifted gently through the atmosphere shield, to be greeted by immortal meddling is the one constant in the universe... Ah!' On one the cradle for bay 94. Locking on smoothly, it slid along to enter the bay screen, the Master saw the Doctor and his friends dash into the Doctor's where the docking clamps were waiting.

ridiculously garbed machine, which vanished.

With a faint hum of power, the clamps enfolded the skiff as the outer

On another screen, Shok'Arl and his S'Raph entourage tapped

hull flowed closed.

frantically at their communicators in the S-Four hangar. The

Master threw
the door lever and left his TARDIS.
Stretching out a languid finger, the Master pressed a small red button
beside the joystick on his console.
Moving stiffly, his veins filled with the thick gel being recycled through his
body, Shok'Arl emerged from the sloping doors. The light outside was
The skiff vanished in the white flash of matter-antimatter annihilation.
blinding but implants helped there, too, though he could not see any heat
The blast swept the length of the hangar deck, vaporizing the ships in fields. He turned to the S'Raph with him. 'There is nowhere for us to go, their bays. The floor, walls, and ceiling melted away. Spewing but we cannot be discovered here. You will each board one craft and superheated atmosphere, a huge rip was gouged in the Stormblade's initiate self-destruction.'
upper hull. Alarms gonged sonorously throughout the ship as blast doors
As one, the S'Raph nodded and made for the short row of discs which
sealed themselves in an attempt to maintain hull integrity.
had landed for the evacuation. Shok'Arl himself stepped through the hatch
The heat had already irradiated the main engines, making the of the nearest skiff. Slipping along the curved entryway, he stepped into engineering decks uninhabitable. Unable to cope with the external heat as the circular flight deck, noting that the wave-guide chamber was already well as that produced by the engine reaction, the power taps overloaded. glowing softly. A Ph'Sor with a charred chest was lying dead beside the The engine cut-outs shut down the engines as a series of blasts blew the reactor. Shok'Arl twisted around at the sound of a slight movement from lower hull to shreds. The pylon with the graviton generator spun away, one of the operations booths around the circumference, and found himself buckling and gnawed by blue fire. It disappeared into a gravity well of its face to face with Stoker.
own making, the hull no longer there to control the gravity waves it
'You are absent from your post-' Shok'Arl's reprimand died in his throat
affected.
as he noted that Stoker's usually bright and varied heat pattern was

now

Shockwaves rippled through the interior of *R'Shal*, splashing melted dull and even. Moving with surprising swiftness, he reached out to feel for consoles and sparking secondary explosions which bloomed on the hull a pulse, ignoring the yellow stain trailing from Stoker's mouth. As his hand like teenage acne. The stresses that twisted the fabric of the ship finally touched Stoker's neck, Stoker fell from the stool and sprawled across the strained the magnetic constrictor coils too far, and they burst like popped deck plating.

bubbles. Matter and antimatter from the main engines, and began their

A black knife-hilt protruded from below the right shoulder-blade.

cycle of mutual annihilation.

Shok'Arl straightened, blanking out the instinctive anger at yet another

Soundless in the vacuum above, the Tzun Stormblade *R'Shal* and its casualty by analysing the incident as if he were mentally debriefing Stoker crew flashed into billions of microscopic gleaming fragments.

himself. It was not a difficult task, since there could be few on this world

who would be certain of the unusual physiology of a human Ph'Sor Tzun.

Watching as the large blip that marked the Stormblade vanished from the In fact, as far as Shok'Arl was aware, there was only one.

orbital tracking display on the large curved screen, the Master tugged the

'He decided he was loyal to you after all,' the rich voice said from the

small unit free from the panel by the monitor and joystick. Smiling like shadows on the far side of the flight deck, where the wave-guide someone who has just returned from a relaxing holiday, he blew across chamber's energies had masked his heat pattern. Shok'Arl turned the connectors as if blowing smoke from the barrel of a gun.

impassively to see the Master emerge into the light.

Tossing the unit carelessly aside now that its usefulness was over -

'You have been disloyal,' the Tzun stated unemotionally.

much like the Tzun themselves - the Master looked up at the bank of

'This was by way of being a pre-emptive retaliatory strike,' the Master

explained with a wan smile. 'The bargain we struck was that you would

'Uniqueness?' the Master suggested. 'But of course! Did you really

integrate Earth into the Confederacy; not run like a group of startled imagine that the simple military tactics of a common warrior race could rabbits when someone saw you.' His voice became scornful. 'Perhaps out-think a Time Lord of the first rank?' He laughed aloud.

your twenty-five-millennia-old warrior race doesn't have the power or the

Shok'Arl nodded slowly, the voices of past lives whispering of their own

skills to eliminate a barely industrialized society.'

eventual defeats as the last pieces of the jigsaw fell into place. 'You have

'I could lay waste to this world,' Shok'Arl said slowly. 'I could have been a worthy opponent, then, if an unworthy ally,' he conceded. 'I will not captured and held it in two to three days, if I so chose.'

say it has been an honourable engagement.' He was trapped now,

'Then why did you choose to run?'

without reinforcements or transport from Earth. No doubt he would soon

'You would not understand,' Shok'Arl hissed, the list of casualties be hunted by the humans for the betrayal, or by others to exploit him and increasing his venom. 'We are warriors, not butchers. We fight, not plan their own campaigns.

murder. You are but a renegade who flees his own kind; a criminal who

He knew his limitations, and his options.

steals a life as thoughtlessly as he steals possessions. I would not expect

Shok'Arl raised one hand to the left side of his neck. 'My

you to comprehend the dishonour that would be wrought by destroying congratulations. You, at least, have what you desire.' Without warning, he this world from afar; by forcing its people to die in their holes in the snatched up the disruptor that lay on the console. The Master, more used ground, without even tasting the enemy's blood in the air.' Shok'Arl's voice to the Earth-type gravity, was faster. He triggered the tissue compression reeked with disgust at the very thought. 'I would, however, have thought eliminator as Shok'Arl broke for the door.

you practical enough to realize that we need this world intact, to reap its

The Tzun didn't quite make it, the blast taking him down the right side

resources. We do not conquer, we envelop. Each culture we integrate as he tumbled from the skiff.

gains as much from us as we do from them. To win our victories

without

The Master looked on, his face thoughtful but otherwise unreadable.

recourse to the random factors of mere physical violence; that is the 'Have I?' he murmured contemplatively. 'I think not. Not for a long time.'

honour to which all Tzun aspire!

'You, who conquer not for survival or honour, or even mere glory, but

simply because you believe you can; you dare to question our courage?

Your ham-fisted blundering has made this world worthless to us! Now that

our intent is exposed in the worst possible light, thanks to you, none of the

people of this world will trust us one iota. They can now never allow any

co-operation between us, and without that co-operation there can be no

interrelationships of culture; they would resist us so much that we would

have to destroy that which we came to find!'

The Master applauded with a mocking slow handclap. 'If I didn't know

better I could almost swear you did absorb the Doctor's RNA.'

Shok'Arl stiffened, irritation roiling within him. 'What is the purpose of

this betrayal?'

'If I'm fortunate, the Moscow bomb will spark war and destroy this insipid little planet. At the very least, however, I can be certain of being

safe from you. I could hardly leave you with data on my DNA and RNA,

could I? It would be foolish in the extreme to risk the possibility of your

cloning me, or creating a biological weapon aimed at me.'

Shok'Arl gazed impassively back at the Master, the mind behind the

black eyes scarcely able to face the dishonour, even of another, of such

magnitude. 'You used us,' he said in something approaching horrified awe, his vast memory unable to recall a precedent of well-considered

treachery on such a scale. 'The whole assimilation of Earth was but

a feint
to enable your recovery; merely the means to ensure your own-'

the hand freezing on the buttoned flap as the voice on the other end of
the line told him that someone had let an unidentified aircraft pass the

northern defence boundaries.

Loganov's blond supervisor had gone absent without leave an hour

ago, and Loganov wondered if this could have something to do with the

Nyby looked around the glassy corner of the administration block to see power failures that had followed recent UFO reports. Perhaps they would several Ph'Sor guarding a row of skiffs from half a dozen or so of the get one this time, as the GRU rumoured the Americans had. He nodded child-sized S'Raph. It was something of a mystery to him why they were unconsciously as he replied with a simple 'Da,' and rattled the telephone now fighting each other, but recalled the woman who had freed him lever. Licking dry lips, he dialled a number. 'Istrebitel'naya aviatsiya,' he saying that the Tzun were leaving because Kreer and Stoker had ordered.

betrayed them.

'No friendlies,' he whispered back to the men behind them, indicating The TARDIS arrived with a resounding crash, its warm and friendly yellow that they should pass it on. When the whispering had stopped, he re-lamp casting a welcoming glow over the ribbed interior of the Comet's

checked the disruptor he held and went over the working of it in his mind. cargo bay. Drab webbing rattled from the metal struts inside the fuselage Satisfied that he had the hang of it, he set it to maximum power and as the three time-travellers scanned the cylindrical chamber through the stepped round the corner, sweeping disruptor-fire across the battlefield.

TARDIS's scanner. In the centre of the screen, the misleadingly

To his flank, the rattle of machine-gun fire started up as the various innocuous form of the warhead squatted, securely fixed onto a cargo armed men among his remaining personnel fanned out. They poured fire pallet.

into both sides of the Tzun conflict.

'That box of yours actually works, Ace,' the Doctor commented, turning

The fragile grey forms of the S'Raph were open and exposed, two of back to the console. 'This'll be simple enough. We'll just materialize them immediately blasted off their feet and smashed to the ground like around the plane, jump forward a few minutes and drop it off in space broken dolls. Their deaths were unmarked by the shedding of

any blood.

when the Earth has moved on in its orbit.'

Most of the blond Ph'Sor withdrew into their ships' hatches, splitting

'I shouldn't risk that if I were you,' a voice oozed from the air. Ace spun

their fire between the S'Raph and the humans. Some of them, however, round with the spare blaster she had recovered from her room, while the reasserted their allegiance by opening fire on the other rebellious Ph'Sor. Doctor and Benny ducked and looked searchingly around the console Certain that God was on his side, Nyby got off a shot that blew apart a room. Ace pointed at the scanner screen.

Ph'Sor in an ochre spray. Ignoring the fact that he seemed to have set the

Instead of the interior of the aircraft, the aquiline features of the Master

weapon unnecessarily high, Nyby moved on as a shot from another man grinned down at them. It was hard to tell in the darkness of his TARDIS, blew a Ph'Sor to the dusty ground in a trail of yellowish blood.

but he seemed to be seated comfortably in a stuffed armchair of some

Nyby tossed the two fallen Ph'Sors' disruptors to other humans, and kind, the kitling in his lap. 'Why Doctor, it hardly becomes you to travel in, pulled the pin on a grenade. He hurled it through the hatch of a ship. A shall we say, economy class.' He tutted softly. 'I'm very disappointed in muffled explosion from inside was followed by a raucous alarm, and then you.'

the disc exploded in a blue flash.

'I had enough experience of first class on Concorde; I'm sure you'll

Continuing towards the end of the row of discs, Nyby saw a black-clad understand why that put me off. What do you want now? Don't you realize figure leap from the farthest one and make a dash for a black car a few you've already lost this round?' The Doctor jabbed his finger yards away. He fired immediately, as did a number of S'Raph and Ph'Sor. admonishingly at the screen, like a child cowboy irritated by an Indian They were all too late. The car remained peculiarly unaffected by the who won't play dead.

multiple disruptor blasts as the figure leapt inside. It then vanished into

'Such ingratitude, after all the times I've saved your life.'

thin air with an echoing tone.

'Only after you've endangered it in the first place!'

'Really? But I have so few worthy adversaries, I can't afford to waste

A khaki-clad arm lifted the insistently grating telephone, cradling it with them - no neological pun intended. Actually, I was referring to your little disinterested looseness. 'Radioteknicheskie Voiska, Moskva. idea there, Doctor. I have altered the fusing of that warhead rather a lot Podpolkovnik Loganov.'

since Miss Ace defused the other one. Should it come within the area of

Loganov reached into the breast pocket of his uniform for a cigarette, effect of a relative dimensional stabilizer, such as inside a TARDIS, the bomb will detonate. Needless to say the warhead is also set to explode if who should have stayed mining in the Reticulum system, were no more you open the lid of its container or tamper with any part of the than disposable tools. They were slaves to his whim, and discarded when mechanism. I suppose I shouldn't have dared hope for a little gratitude.' their usefulness was over,' he growled darkly. 'He treated them less like He chuckled slightly, as if recalling a forgotten but favourite joke. 'You the physicians who healed him than like a disposable hypo after it's know, you have a most interesting choice now. You can leave in safety, emptied.' He stalked out of the main doors.

and that bomb will detonate over Moscow and kill four hundred thousand

'Funny how history repeats itself,' Ace said quietly.

people at least, even if it doesn't spark global holocaust; or you can safely

'How do you mean?' Benny asked.

remove it in the TARDIS, destroying yourself, your young friends and that

'The Tzun in 1957, Daleks in 1963, Cybermen in 1988, Hoothi on ridiculous contraption of yours.' He laughed, eyebrows raised in a manner Heaven...' She silenced herself with a sheepish look and followed the that indicated he could see the looks on their faces as well as they could Doctor out.

see him.

He was kneeling beside the warhead, listening carefully. 'Ace, Benny,'

'That's despicable,' Benny whispered.

he said in a low voice, 'this plane's probably on automatic, so I suggest

'Thank you, my dear.' The Master nodded gracefully. 'One tries one's you two go forward and try to divert it away from Moscow.'

best.' He tilted his head thoughtfully. 'As a consolation, you may

Benny remained where she was, wondering if the Doctor were trying to

appreciate that I have generously - more than generously - taken care of get them out of the way so he could sacrifice himself. She knew he would the Tzun for you.'

do it if necessary, but something about his face said that he was more

'What?' the Doctor asked in a dangerous tone. 'They were civilized interested in thwarting the Master by finding a third alternative. She beings; intelligent enough to realize that they should leave of their own followed Ace forward.

volition.'

Ace had barely stepped into the cockpit when an arm swung at her

'Not with my DNA on board,' the Master corrected. 'Shok'Arl even had with considerable force. Ducking it, she slammed a fist into the solar the nerve to accuse me of dishonour, but I can forgive him that - he's just plexus of the man who had made the attack. The co-pilot lunged at feeling a little brought down, after all. It would have been nice to destroy Benny. She twisted his arm and tossed him through the narrow door. Ace Earth, of course, but *c'est la guerre*. Please think carefully about your finished off the pilot with an elbow to the face, and dropped into his seat.

decision, Doctor, you have about eight minutes in which to make it. Until

'Maybe I should take some flying lessons,' she said in a half-serious

we meet again, humanity permitting...' The satanic image on the screen voice.

dissolved in a white haze as his laughter faded into static.

'Right, but at least you shouldn't have to try landing this one.' Benny

The Doctor remained staring at the speaker for a moment, lips thin and looked at the two stunned figures lying just outside the doorway. They bloodless. Benny could practically feel the anger radiating from him. didn't seem to be Ph'Sor, she thought, which meant they were probably

'Perhaps he did something good, if for bad reasons,' she suggested humans hypnotized by the Master. She considered leaving them to their quietly. She didn't believe it herself, but hoped it would ease the mood.

fate in the small galley behind the cockpit, but couldn't quite bring herself

'Did something good...' the Doctor breathed hoarsely, turning to fix her to do it. They weren't really responsible after all.

with a burning gaze. She flinched away. 'The Tzun were leaving,'

he went

'I'm probably going to regret this,' she muttered to herself, grabbing the

on, 'since they'd evolved far enough to recognize the need for mutual co-pilot by the arm and dragging him back towards the TARDIS.

operation of sorts. Now thousands of them are dead; frozen remains drifting in empty space for the rest of time.'

The last skiff exploded on the tarmac just as the sound of approaching

'I know,' she said, trying to find the words to tell him that she didn't like aircraft became audible from the southeast. In the distance between the it either. 'At least the Earth is safe.'

two peaks that guarded the exit to the dry lake, the dark form of a

'Oh yes,' the Doctor snarled with uncommon viciousness, 'the Earth is Hercules approached. Several buzzing helicopters flanked it, dropping safe all right, but it would never have been endangered if not for him. The groundwards as pathfinders for the transport.

Master drew the Tzun here purely for his own gratification, and then Though he resented actually needing any help, Nyby looked up at

wiped them out when he was finished with them. The whole crew; them with renewed hope. The cavalry had arrived at last.

thousands of intelligent living beings were all dead from the moment they

received his signal!' Quivering with rage, he swiped at the door lever as if Marion scanned the bowl-shaped central area of Corman through by doing so he could harm the flesh of his fellow renegade. 'Those Tzun, binoculars from the leading S-58 helicopter. The buildings looked like rock from above, but were marked by smoke rising here and there. Several

He was about to hail the aircraft again when a woman's voice sounded

white-roofed hangars out on the dry lake were on fire, while a row of wearily in his earphones. 'Yob tvoyemaj, Leitenant Ivanyev,' it said tiredly.

blackened craters smouldered on the tarmac in front of the open S-Four

Speechless, Ivanyev checked his wingman's position and then

doors. The married quarters and recreation areas seemed to be the only triggered a warning shot of an underwing missile.

places untouched by violence.

She could see several groups of armed men in various stages of dress The Doctor hung grimly onto the warhead's casing, his face a

mask of darting about, while smaller groups of blond men fought them from alarm, while Benny tried to catch hold of a corner of the TARDIS. 'Ace,'

beleaguered positions around the large dish antenna. The dish itself was the Doctor shouted reproachfully as the plane steadied after its sudden scarred and blackened.

lurch, 'what do you think you're doing?' Checking his pulses theatrically,

Marion felt a twinge of her old lack of confidence, and quickly looked he carefully extricated his sonic screwdriver from the exposed wiring of for a suitable landing spot. 'Put us down next to the dish,' she told the the disruptor Ace had brought from the telemetry chamber, and continued pilot. He nodded, and guided the helicopter further downwards. Marion's dismantling it.

confidence returned somewhat with the understanding that the pilot was

'All right, I'll let the next one hit us,' Ace called back impatiently.

willing to follow her orders even into a combat situation.

'Just give me some warning!'

'What are you doing?' Benny prompted, indicating the disruptor and a

Two gleaming arrow-forms rose smoothly through the snowfield-like strange pair of goggles that belonged to Ace.

upper surface of the cloud cover, taking up station on either flank. The red

'Modifying the molecular debonding regulator of this disruptor into a

stars on their tail-fins contrasted more with the silver skin than the blue ID phase transmuter with a twelve-inch radius spherical area of effect numbers on their noses.

centred at a range of-' he took a quick look at the warhead through the

Eyeing them warily, Ace called back into the cargo area, 'We've got goggles ' -seventeen inches.'

company!'

'Which will do what, exactly?'

'How many?' the Doctor shouted back tersely.

'Dematerialize the detonator, reducing it to its component atoms

'Two fighters. MiGs of some kind, I think. My database doesn't have instantly and permanently. The principle's that of a transmat details on specific models this far back.'

dematerialization, but without reintegrating the matter afterwards. A

'Unidentified aircraft,' a voice crackled over the radio. 'This is

disruptor only shakes molecules apart anyway, this is just refining the Lieutenant Ivanyev of the Soviet air defence force. Identify yourself and process a bit.' He put away the sonic screwdriver and closed up the prepare to alter course.'

disruptor. 'Get me ten seconds of smooth flight, Ace!'

Ace tried to think of a suitable reply, but she had been busy for so long

'I'll try. Hold on!'

that she couldn't recall the last time she had slept. Her mind just wasn't up

The aircraft banked again.

to it, she decided.

There was little sound of battle when Marion dropped from the landed

Pyotr Ivanyev awaited a reply, hoping they would offer one. He didn't want helicopter, and she figured that most of the fighting was over.

to be responsible for killing civilian travellers, if that's what they were, but Accompanied by Lieutenant Wood and two air policemen, Marion moved he was willing to open fire if necessary. His station commander had towards Nyby, who was walking towards something in the shadows under reminded him of the unidentified aeroforms that had been plaguing their the dish. Helicopters were disgorging air police at various points around airspace in recent months, and pointed out that they were suspected of the mountain-shaded base, while the Hercules roared towards the natural causing power black-outs in several republics. If this one could not gateway along the main runway.

account for itself, he was not to allow it to do more damage.

There was a low bunker under the dish, from which wisps of smoke

Ivanyev wasn't sure why nothing had been done about the problem were rising. Marion saw Nyby, a curious mix of dismay and blood-lust on before, but privately wondered if it didn't have something to do with the his face, making for a sprawled form that flailed weakly at the edge of a several mid-ranking officers who had vanished overnight. He knew he trench-like stairwell leading down to the bunker door. The acrid stench of would never know, since it didn't do to ask questions. Personally, he spent cordite puffed across the open ground, backed by a strange suspected that they had been arrested for failing to handle this problem ammoniac smell.

properly.

Marion felt the blood drain from her face, along with the last of her

resolve that this was a matter of terrestrial opponents, as she closed in on

The Doctor pulled down the goggles and braced himself, resting the

the sprawled form and saw what it was. She heard a click behind her, and disruptor across his forearm. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he quickly clamped a hand on the barrel that was pointing at the grotesquely moved forward to within a few inches of the corrugated metal.

twisted form. 'No,' she said, trying to keep her gorge from rising. 'We're

As Benny watched, unconsciously holding her breath as well, he not here to butcher.'

squeezed the trigger.

Nyby looked round, a fervent light in his eyes. 'Did the Pentagon send

There was a faint buzz.

you? They're traitors, you see,' he explained brightly. 'They said they The Doctor lowered the disruptor and swept the goggles across the

wanted to help America be stronger than the Soviets, but they really container. He pulled them off with a grin just as the plane lurched again.

wanted to make us just like them...' He stopped, a confused look flashing 'Ace, come on.' He ushered Benny into the TARDIS. Ace appeared a few across his heavy features. 'Some of them, anyway. You can't tell,' he seconds later. 'I've set the autopilot, but they'll blow us to bits any muttered.

second.'

Marion felt her heart sink, and wished she had never met the Doctor,

'Doesn't matter,' the Doctor smiled. 'The bomb is disarmed, and as it

because then she wouldn't have to do what was now her duty. 'You're can no longer have a critical mass it can't detonate when the plane is being relieved of command, General,' she said regretfully, 'and placed destroyed.' He ushered her into the TARDIS as well, following close under arrest for sharing classified materials with... non-allied powers. behind. 'I think we can trust an air-to-air missile to dispose of the aircraft There may be other charges to follow,' she added.

and the remainder of the bomb.' He threw the dematerialization switch.

'It was all for my country, you know. Everything was so that kids

could

grow up safe...'

Ivanyev sighted the air-to-air reticule on the bulky form of the converted

'No,' a weak voice buzzed from beyond Nyby. 'Nyby was unaware of airliner, wondering briefly if any of the people on board were really our true intent.'

imperialists intending to wipe out Soviet families. It was academic in any

Her attention thus drawn, Marion couldn't tear her eyes away from the case, as any hesitation on his part would be met with severe punishment, sprawled figure beside which Nyby knelt. It was clearly not human, the even should the occupants be innocent travellers.

olive skin and violet eyes proving that as effectively as its odd muscle

'Forgive me,' he whispered, and pressed the trigger. From under his

structures. The worst thing about it was that the creature's right side was MiG 19's starboard wing, a steel spear lanced out across the sky.

withered and atrophied, its arm and leg so tiny as to make it look like a

The Comet tore itself apart.

cartoon genie only half-way out of its bottle. A forest of puckered tubes of

olive skin emerged from that side, drawn out from the shrunken flesh by The padlocked door marked 'IPU' slammed open under the impact of the taut tubes that were pulsing thickly via their implant sockets. Tears in several rifle butts, the noise drawing stares from the sombrely suited the stretched flesh oozed a clear gel which carried the scent of ammonia.

workers passing at a safe distance along the dead-straight corridors of

'You were right about us,' the Tzun croaked, the light guttering fitfully at the Pentagon.

his throat. 'We are not so dissimilar.' Marion watched in horror as the

Uniformed men poured in, expecting to catch the strange blond officers

creature shifted slightly, a bubbling croak issuing from several of the who had appropriated the room engaged in some nefarious purpose.

plastic tubes as they tore free with faint sucking pops. It seemed to make

Instead, the room was empty, stripped bare of every furnishing.

an effort to rally its fading strength. 'I, too, had only my people's survival at

heart,' it gasped. 'We desired only peaceful coexistence.' It groaned in a Robert Agar stared at the box into which he had piled all his notes and wheezing manner. 'We only wanted to live. Only... live...' The bubbling pictures of the saucer and its crew. Somehow it didn't seem the same croak wheezed into nothingness.

now that their origin had been revealed to him.

Unsure whether to relax, cry or throw up, Marion settled for looking on

Admittedly, he told himself with false cheer, they were genuine aliens.

as Nyby let the disruptor drop from nerveless fingers. The general It didn't ease the pain of the thought that they were as deceitful as mere straightened with a sad expression. 'I stand relieved,' he said in a humans. Strangely, they also seemed less interesting without their air of toneless whisper.

mystery.

He chuckled to himself, amused by his own blindness. He hadn't even

'You've got about ten seconds,' Ace shouted as a MiG flashed past the realized that what interested him about them was the mystery of who they windows in a wide circle.

were. An answer seemed to cheapen them somehow. If this was a story

in a tabloid, he reflected, he'd never have believed it.

violet of the edge of space, an aurora of glittering dust particles flashed

Wait, he thought, that's not such a bad idea. Adamski published his into flame as they descended into the atmosphere and were vaporized; memoirs, so why not me?

tiny flares sparkling and glinting like the silver pin-points of the stars which

He began pulling documents back out of the box.

hung beyond them as a silent backdrop to their passing.

Finney awoke with a flash of pain. He flailed at his chest, trying to tug free

the harness that he felt sure was there. The plane had been going down

over frozen water, the wounded he was carrying crying out in the darkness of the passenger section. Then there was icy pain, a jointed

cable support spearing his leg as another cannon-shell hit...

Except that the pain was in his neck this time, around the base of

the
skull.
He opened his eyes to see a shaft of golden sunlight streaming through the window of a tiny private room in the medical wing at Holloman. His mind cleared, recalling that he had followed Stoker out into
the desert and boarded a flying saucer. Then... what? He sat up, feeling
something fall from his pyjama collar. He reached around, his fingers finally touching a piece of sticky metal. Lifting it into the rich light, he saw
that it was a thick metal needle of some kind, cloaked in drying blood. The
brassy metal crumbled as he watched.
'I'm glad you're back with us,' the Doctor said from a pool of shadow
beside the door. 'I didn't save you once just to... Well, that's another story.
You might like to know that there are two civilian pilots in need of beds
like that one, so I suggest you get up and about!' He smiled dimly in the
shadows.
Finney didn't like being confused, but had become resigned to it recently.
'What about Kreer and the disc?'
'The discs and their owners are all long gone. Some people from Washington have spirited away the odd bits and pieces, though they've
also cleared out their own house at the Pentagon. It seems that a number
of DoD staff have mysteriously vanished. As for Kreer - well, I don't imagine you'll be seeing his face again. I have to go now - people to see,
places to go. So do you, in fact. Poor Marion's positively snowed under
with administrative paperwork that you know how to deal with.'
'Marion Davison? The press officer?'
'Major Marion Davison, the acting station commander. You might not
be able to get her out of your chair, you know.'
'Well... I have two things to say before you go. Firstly, thanks for keeping things right.'
'And second?'

'Don't ever come here again,' Finney said simply, with neither humour
nor rancour.

High in the stratosphere, where the blueness of the sky darkened to the